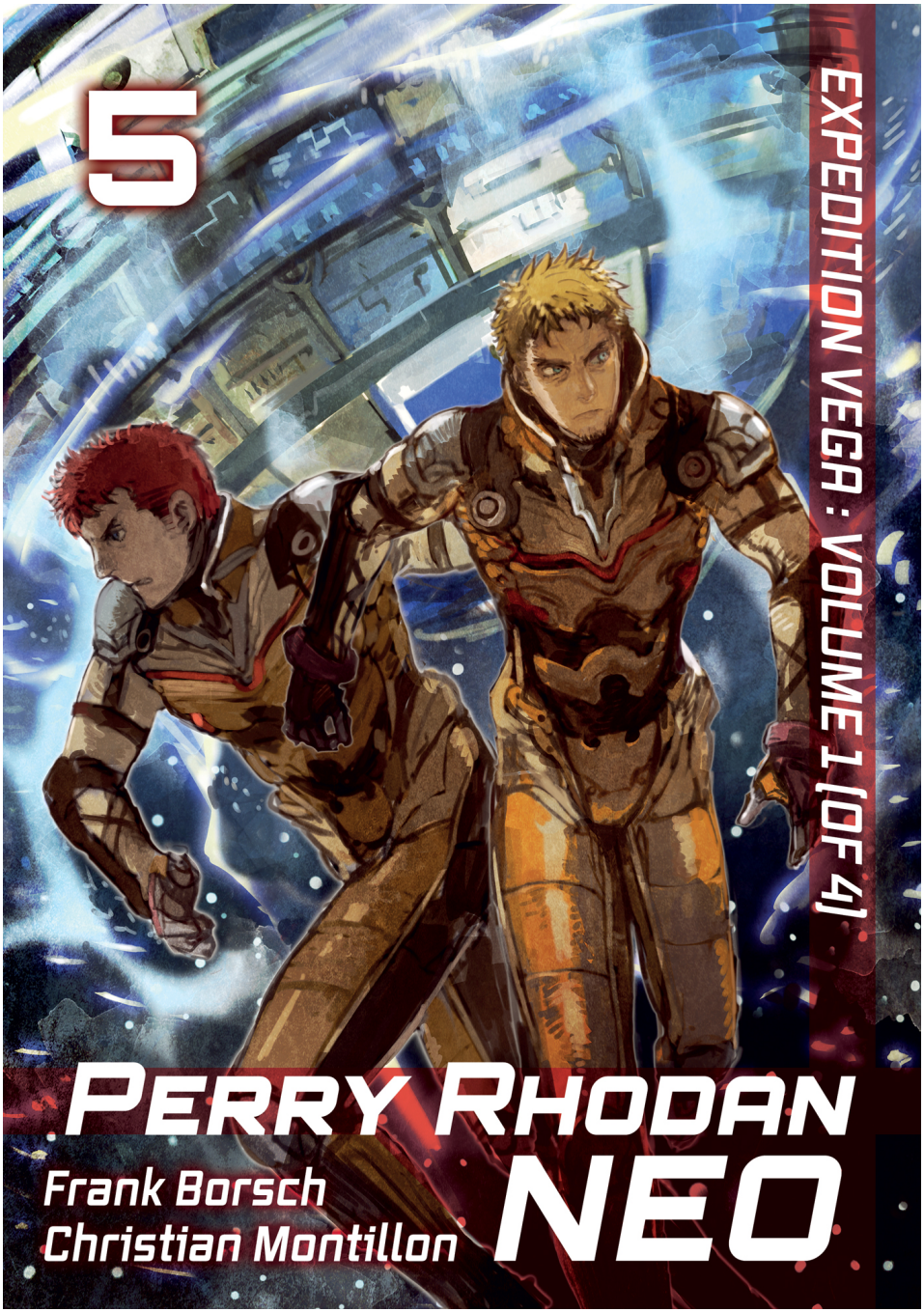
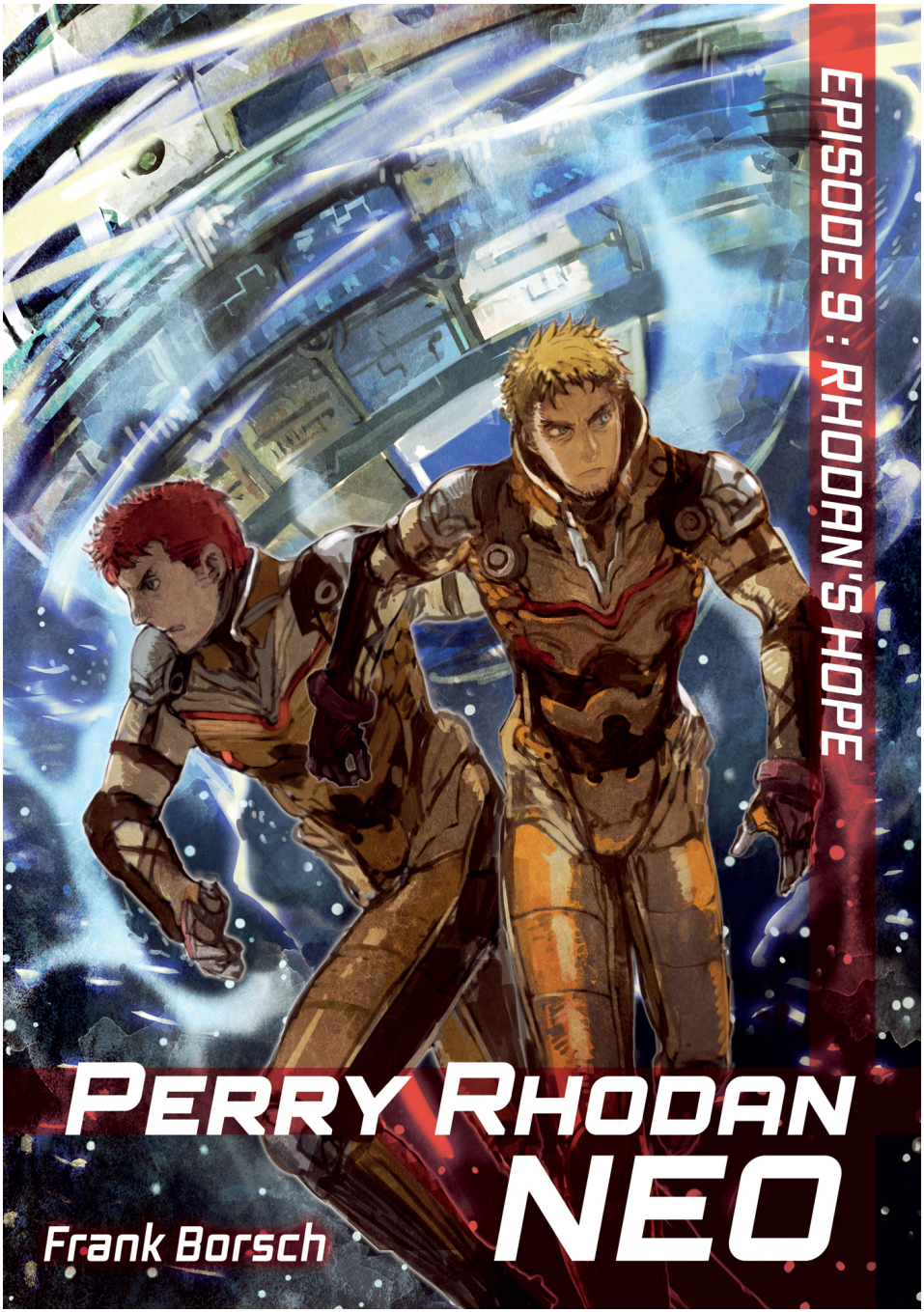

5
EXPEDITION VEGA : VOLUME 1 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN NEO
Frank Borsch
Christian Montillon

Table of Contents

Cover

Episode 9: Rhodan's Hope
Episode 10: In the Light of Vega

About J-Novel Club
Copyright


EPISODE 9: RHODAN'S HOPE
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Frank Borsch

Episode 9: Rhodan's Hope

By Frank Borsch

1.

July 25, 2036
Perry Rhodan

To the west, in the light of the first rays of the rising sun, the Manhattan skyline stretched into the air. Thick black smoke rose between the skyscrapers, almost engulfing the Freedom Tower entirely. Only the very tip, with its giant American flag, jutted out.

"Geoff, look! Manhattan is burning!"

Jenny Luwalski, who had sat next to Perry Rhodan for the past fifteen hours and knew him only by his alias, placed a hand on his forearm and squeezed firmly.

Rhodan suppressed the impulse to brush her hand away. The young woman couldn't have guessed how uncomfortable the gesture made him. Her grip caused the artificial skin covering his hands and arms to rub against his own skin. It burned.

Rhodan bent forward to look through the small window as people everywhere in the aging Boeing Dreamliner began to whisper. The plane was packed, not with tourists and businesspeople, as it would have been in normal times, but with Americans living overseas who were rushing back home to their friends and families to check that everything was all right.

Citizens like Jenny, a feisty woman in her mid-twenties who had run away from her deeply religious parents and their megachurch when she was eighteen and ultimately become a fashion designer in Qatar. Her look was the obsession of half the

Islamic world.

People like Rhodan too. Purportedly. His passport presented him as Geoff Seymour, a civil engineer in his late thirties from Upstate New York. He'd been working abroad in the Gulf and had now frantically left to rejoin the wife and three-year-old son he had left behind.

The Dreamliner swung in for landing, passing so close to Manhattan that the skyline seemed near enough to touch. The rattling of machine guns drowned out the uniform hum of the engines. A muffled *bang* followed. A new cloud of smoke and rubble surged up and proceeded to swallow the United Nations building.

"Good God!" Jenny whispered. "It's just like back then, isn't it?"

Rhodan didn't reply. He grew dizzy. This was not the new world he wanted to build. The burning spread from his forearm to his hand and into his fingertips. It didn't mean anything, he told himself. A side effect; nothing more. The second skin could withstand a lot of stress, he had been assured.

Jenny let go of his arm and grasped his shoulder. "Geoff, are you all right?" she asked. "Shall I call a flight attendant?"

Rhodan took a deep breath, laid his hand on Jenny's, and squeezed. She took his hand in hers and returned the gesture. The pressure eased the burning.

"Thanks!" he said. "I'm fine now. It's just..."

"You don't need to explain, Geoff," Jenny said consolingly. "I feel the same way. But it'll all work out! We'll manage this! Just like last time. We'll take down that terrorist Rhodan! Him and his whole band in the Gobi!"

"Yeah, we will," Rhodan quietly affirmed.

On the display in the back of the seat in front of him, the head of a flight attendant appeared.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing in a few minutes. Qatar Southwest kindly asks you to fasten your seat belts."

Rhodan freed his hand from Jenny Luwalski's grip and followed the instructions.

Soldiers from the National Guard had occupied the terminal and were standing at the gates in pairs. To Jenny, the presence of armed soldiers was a relief.

"You see, Geoff?" she said on the way to baggage claim. "Our government has it all under control!"

Rhodan nodded politely and kept his thoughts to himself. The terminal was overcrowded. There were people sitting everywhere, often whole families. They looked as though they were camping out. The snack machines were empty, the fast food outlets were closed, and the moving walkways were still. It stank when they walked past the bathrooms. The air was hot and stuffy. The AC had to have broken down, or else it had been switched off to keep the overtaxed power grid from collapsing.

To Rhodan's surprise, their baggage had already been unloaded by the time they reached the claim area. He helped Jenny heave her oversized suitcase dotted with Arabic letters off the conveyor belt and onto a cart. Then he grabbed his rolling suitcase, a worn grey thing. Former Chinese secret service agents who had defected to the Terran movement had packed it for him. Each item had been meticulously chosen to build a coherent portrait of a worried father who had left in a hurry.

Rhodan and Jenny stood in the line for immigration. He was happy to have the young woman with him, even if she would have turned him in to the authorities on the spot if she knew his true identity. Despite that, Jenny provided conversation. And conversation provided a distraction. From the burning of his skin, from his pulse that was racing far too quickly. From the sight of Manhattan burning. From what lay before him.

"Is your family picking you up?" she asked.

He shook his head. "My wife wanted to, but I felt it was too risky. Three hours' drive under these circumstances..."

"You're right. But my parents couldn't hold themselves back. If you want, we could take you some of the way."

"Thanks. That's really thoughtful of you. But I've already arranged for someone else to pick me up."

Jenny was next in line. She passed through the body scanner without triggering an alarm. At the counter, the official, an overweight black man, showed her a beaming smile and completed the check within moments.

Then it was Rhodan's turn. His pulse jerked.

"Put your baggage on the belt, please, sir," a middle-aged Latina official requested. "Then I'll ask you to step into the scanner. Put your feet on the marks and raise your arms slightly." She raised her arms to half height in demonstration. Large sweat stains were visible under her arms.

Rhodan lifted his suitcase onto the conveyor belt and hoped the official didn't notice the trembling that had overcome him. A curtain descended around him, which was a mercy. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to breathe slowly and calm his throbbing pulse. He heard a whirr and felt a draft as the scanner arms moved up and down. Then the curtain lifted again.

The officer bent over her tablet. Her eyes narrowed as she read. Then she swiped the screen with her fingers.

"Something wrong?" Rhodan asked, annoyed with himself before he'd even voiced the question. He didn't want to draw any attention to himself. He couldn't.

The woman didn't answer; she just continued to play with her tablet. The burning in his right arm flared up again, rising to his shoulders and jumping to his left arm. He grit his teeth to try to avoid showing any sign of it.

At last, the official looked up. She smiled apologetically. "Please excuse me, sir. An error in the database query. You can go through."

"Thanks!"

Rhodan took his suitcase and went up to the counter. He'd crossed the first hurdle. His pulse calmed down slightly. The burning on his skin waned.

"Passport, sir!" the man at the counter demanded. He wore glasses; his job evidently didn't pay well enough for him to afford eye treatment. Rhodan handed him the fake passport that Mercant had arranged for him.

The official held the passport over the sensor. A moment later, a green light appeared. The second hurdle was behind him.

"Please place your right hand on the surface indicated, sir!"

The final, all-important hurdle. Rhodan reached out and laid his hand on the surface before him. His skin burned all the way to his fingertips. The burning wasn't visible; the second skin covering his hand looked natural.

It *was* natural.

Rhodan felt a sting in the tip of his middle finger as the machine removed a tiny piece of skin to compare his DNA with the Homeland Security database. The search would lead nowhere—that, at least, Mercant and the other former secret agents had assured him. The DNA the machine had scraped off was not Rhodan's. Dr. Frank Haggard, the ingenious Nobel Prize for

Medicine winner with whom Crest and Eric Manoli had safely returned to Terrania, had worked out a means of deceiving Homeland Security in no time at all. Real human skin had now grown over Rhodan's hands and arms. The process was still in its early days, but Haggard was confident that he'd soon be able to cover far bigger areas, perhaps even the entire body. For now, though, the hands were enough.

So Rhodan hoped, anyway.

His hopes were not dashed. The official eyed the database query results on the counter's embedded display and confirmed them with a press of the finger.

The last hurdle had been overcome.

"Thank you, sir." The man handed his passport back. "Welcome home!"

Jenny Luwalski was waiting for him by the automatic doors that led to the waiting area.

"I wish you all the best, Geoff!" She hugged him. "And don't worry too much. Everything's going to be okay! I can feel it—and believe me, my gut is never wrong!"

She strained against the heavily laden cart and pushed it towards the door. Hundreds of people were packed into the waiting area, each looking at every new arrival, faces full of expectation. Someone in the crowd cried out shrilly. Jenny returned the cry, and a few moments later, the young woman tried to hug both of the parents she had run away from years before. She sobbed unrestrainedly.

Rhodan stopped by the door and looked around. Across the room, people held up homemade signs to greet their families. Where was... Glancing around, he found the sign he sought. It was small, barely the size of printer paper, and showed a company logo: BSC Airport Shuttle Services. A short man in a faded uniform held it aloft. Rhodan approached him—and wavered. The man had a head of dense black hair and a wide nose that defined his whole face. He raised his bushy eyebrows when he noticed Rhodan's hesitancy and walked over to him.

"Geoff Seymour?"

"Yes."

The man stopped in front of him. "I'm the driver you requested."

Rhodan took in the man. His gaze got stuck on the eyes. They were gray, not blue, as they should have been, but this was exactly what confirmed he had the right man in front of him. The driver was disguised, just as Rhodan was.

"Allan?" he asked.

"Correct. Allan Mercowitz. At your service, sir!" The man, who was actually called Allan D. Mercant, gave him a conspiratorial wink. "Right this way, sir! May I take your baggage?"

Mercant led Rhodan to the parking lot reserved for taxis and shuttle services. A beige minivan with a BSC logo waited some distance away. By now, the morning sun hung halfway up in the sky. A clear day, but Rhodan couldn't help his overriding impression that the smell of smoke was everywhere.

This didn't escape Mercant's notice. "You're not imagining it, sir. It smells of fire."

The short man slid into the driver's seat while Rhodan got in on the passenger side. Then Mercant drove off.

Traffic was bad on the airport grounds, but once they turned onto the interstate going north, it quickly abated. Again and again, they passed slow-moving army convoys. Tanks on low loaders, armored vehicles, and—to Rhodan's surprise—occasional ordinary pick-up trucks with heavy machine guns fixed to their beds.

"The government is getting more desperate," Mercant commented. "Three hours ago, President Drummond announced a state of emergency. Unrest has broken out in most major cities."

"How's Manhattan?"

"It's hard to say. I'm not getting any news. The net is dead."

"What's your assumption?"

"I reckon there's fighting. A lot of people still have a score to settle with Wall Street."

Mercant braked as a checkpoint appeared before them. The former secret agent drove up to the blockade slowly. A policeman in body armor turned a scanner towards the license plate and waved the minivan through.

Mercant accelerated. "How was your flight?"

"I learned more about modern fashion design and the nightlife in Doha than I'd ever dared to hope." He shrugged. "Apart from that, a lot of tense boredom. We were diverted several times."

"The government had to block off parts of the airspace. Three passenger flights were downed over Los Angeles after insurgents

stormed a depot with shoulder-fired ground-to-air missiles."

"What?" Rhodan jerked up. "Why?"

"No idea. But the world is full of crazies, and at times like these, they crawl out of their holes. High time for it all to be over."

"How are the others?"

"Anne Sloane is already at the base and in the boss's hands. John Marshall and Sid González should be arriving at Newark as we speak." Mercant swiped across the pod secured to the dashboard. "I see their flight arrived ahead of schedule. They've just passed through immigration, and my people have made contact with them. They're on their way."

"Good."

Rhodan was genuinely relieved. Over the last few days, he had rapidly learned to value John Marshall as a calm and reliable figure. Sid, meanwhile... Literally thousands of people were in that boy's debt. If he hadn't been there, the nuclear bomb placed under the Terrania energy shield by the Chinese secret service would have cost countless lives. But Sid had only survived the explosion by the skin of his teeth—and the boy's fiery temperament made him unpredictable. All the same, they needed him. He alone made their ludicrous plan into merely a daring one.

"What about Thora?" Rhodan asked.

Thora da Zoltral, the Arkonide, was their plan's second weak link. She had to pretend to be human and pass through security, presenting herself as a typical American rushing home in an hour of emergency. Could she manage that? And could they trust her?

Rhodan hoped so. It had to be possible. He and his colleagues, all the people dedicated to the dream of Terra and a united mankind, Thora and her Arkonide mentor, Crest da Zoltral—they were all in the same boat. They would pull humanity together and push forth to the stars...or they would go down together.

The humans needed Thora. And Thora needed them, needed Rhodan. But, as he had seen more than once by now, she had her own mind. Yet, that mind of hers was exactly what they needed. Without Thora, their plan was impossible.

Mercant swiped across the pod and called up flight data. "Thora's flight to Albany is on time. Four of my best people are picking her up."

"Perfect." Rhodan leaned back. Some of the tension flowed out of him. The initial obstacles were out of the way. Their team had

made it to the United States without being recognized.

The two men fell silent. Rhodan took the opportunity to look more closely at his companion. Mercant had been stationed at Nevada Fields when Rhodan had set out for the Moon in the *Stardust*. An aging agent from the Department of Homeland Security, one of many, a face among tens of thousands at NASA's spaceport, Mercant had switched sides before it was even clear that there was a side to switch to. He was said to have an uncanny knack for knowing what the future would hold.

"Were you in New York on September 11, 2001?" Mercant asked, breaking the silence.

"No. And even if I had been, I wouldn't have understood much. I was two years old. What about you?"

"Early thirties. I'm an old man."

"Were *you* in New York?"

Mercant shook his head. "No. I watched it on TV like everyone else. But that was enough. The next day, I signed up for the army."

"You were a soldier? I didn't know that."

"I wasn't, actually." He made a dismissive hand gesture. "They didn't accept me. Too old. Another no." He laughed softly. "I had already tried it once when I was eighteen. That time I'd been too short for the army. Turns out Homeland Security isn't so picky. The rest, as they say, is history."

"Do you regret your choice?"

"Do you regret yours?"

It caught Rhodan off guard to have the question turned back on him. He struggled for an answer. The former agent waved his hand again.

"You don't have to answer that. It was an unfair question. We're all only human. We have to do what our consciences demand of us."

Mercant concentrated on driving as they passed another military convoy—low loaders carrying tankdozers. The extra-wide vehicles left only a narrow lane for overtaking them. Once the convoy was behind them, the sides of wooded hills appeared from the haze on the horizon. The Catskill Mountains. During his school years, Rhodan had spent the summers there, at a camp by a lake. He remembered sneaking out behind his group's cabin on clear nights, his sleeping bag and mat in hand. He had wanted to look up at the stars. Why, he couldn't have explained.

“We’re almost there.”

Mercant turned on the blinker and left the interstate. An industrial park ran to the west along a four-lane highway. It was abandoned, a victim of the rapid deindustrialization of recent years. The highway eventually narrowed to two lanes. They passed one last building, a former fast food drive-through. For a few minutes, overgrown fields lined the streets, and then a broad concrete strip appeared to the right, strewn with thick black skidmarks that had come from aircraft.

A three-story tower rising from a collection of crooked hangars marked the airstrip. Mercant stopped the minivan. A sign left dangling from only one fixture revealed the place’s name to Rhodan: Vickers Airstrip. One of a thousand in the United States that had been killed off by the dramatic rise in oil prices over the last few years. The ones that were left were now lying fallow, since President Drummond had issued a decree forbidding private air traffic for the foreseeable future.

“Over here, Rhodan. Our flight awaits!”

Mercant got out and walked to one of the hangars. Rhodan followed him, leaving behind Geoff Seymour’s suitcase. He wouldn’t need it anymore.

Mercant pushed open one of the hangar doors. It silently slid aside; someone must have oiled it recently. Rhodan stepped over to the open door. In the half-light of the hangar, he could make out the silhouette of a helicopter.

Mercant went to the side wall and pressed a few buttons. Spotlights lit up, bathing the hangar in glaring artificial light. Being a former test pilot, Rhodan recognized the helicopter’s model at a glance. A Sikorsky UH-60. Until just a few years earlier, it had been the workhorse of the US Air Force under the name “Black Hawk.” But this was no ordinary Black Hawk. The fuselage was painted dark green with a double white line running horizontally along it. The area above the cockpit was white. An American flag adorned the turbine under the rotor blades. Behind the passenger cabin, on the tail boom, stood in large letters: “United States of America.”

“Marine One, the president’s helicopter.” Mercant had stepped over to Rhodan’s side. “A perfect replica...for our perfect replica of the president!”

2.

July 25, 2036
Reginald Bull

A facade! Bull had said, venting his frustration, before Rhodan had set out for the country they no longer called home. *This is all just smoke and mirrors! We're playing pretend!*

Now that he was working his way up the Stardust Tower's central elevator shaft to the roof, his burning upper arm muscles proved him right. He was performing primitive manual labor while literally encased in spectacular Arkonide tech.

A single shaft reached from the first floor to the tip of Terrania's tallest building, an anti-grav lift with no cabins. The first of its kind on Earth, and a test of courage besides. An invisible energy field removed the gravity in the shaft. If you dared to go in, you would float.

In theory, anyway. Right now, the polarity that was supposed to cause a gentle upwards or downwards movement, depending on which side you were on, was not working. Why? The Arkonide building robots couldn't say, and neither could Thora nor Crest. However, they were all agreed that the field itself could be trusted without question.

Bull believed them, at least in this regard. Only, what good did it do to helplessly flounder in the air? In the end, though, he, the tinkerer, had concocted a remedy. Tow cables. The Chinese siege army had left thousands of vehicles around the *Stardust*'s landing site, each equipped with tow cables. Bull had collected some of these, connected them together, and then had them attached to a steel scaffold at the top of the shaft.

With the cables, you could pull yourself up or down. With a little practice—which Bull got an unsurprisingly large amount of since he was busy going up and down the tower from morning to night—a single firm pull was enough to rise two or three stories before the air resistance used up the momentum.

With thirty-four stories so far—the tower was growing by roughly one floor each day—Bull needed eleven pulls at most to overcome the height. That was in the mornings. In the afternoons, when his strength began to wane, it could take fifteen tugs or more.

On this particular afternoon, nine were enough.

The Gobi's dry summer heat was waiting for him on the roof. The sun stood high in the sky, burning every patch of exposed skin. At night, when the temperature fell, that same skin prickled with cold. There were places on Earth better suited to building a city. Or, as Bull had once cried in desperation, "Damn, what did we do wrong in our past lives to end up here on the ass-end of the world?!"

But it was too late. This was the place where they would make their dreams a reality...or they would die.

Bull reached the scaffold the cable was attached to, grabbed a strut, and pushed himself to the side. He slid horizontally through the air until Earth's gravity abruptly took hold and brought him down onto the roof. He stood without difficulty. His years as a test pilot and later as an astronaut had granted him a vastly above-average sense of balance.

At the edge of the roof stood a man surrounded by a waist-high wall of screens to the left and right. They showed still images of news streams from all corners of the Earth. The man had his back to Bull. He was short, reaching barely above Bull's chest even though Bull himself was relatively short for an American. His thick black hair was close-cropped like the pilot's. However, in contrast to Bull, whose unruly crew cut was a rather literal embodiment of his own unruliness, on this man it looked strict. Militaristic. And that was something Bull couldn't stand.

"Longing for days gone by, General?" the former astronaut asked loudly, stepping up behind him.

Bai Jun turned to him slowly. The Chinese man looked thin and fragile compared to the heavyset Bull. He still wore the uniform of the People's Liberation Army, although without any insignias showing nation or rank.

"That title is obsolete, Mr. Bull," he replied in unaccented English. His tone was casual, as if commenting on an incidental pronunciation error.

"Sure. But am I imagining things, or was there a certain longing in that gaze of yours?"

Bull gestured towards the hill that rose from the plain of sand and gravel not far from the city. Lines ran across the hillsides and the summit, the remains of roads, trenches, and dwellings the Chinese army had put there. All on the orders of Bai Jun, who had besieged the *Stardust* after it had landed in the Gobi. Who had spared no effort to present Bull's head and that of his comrades on a silver platter to the general secretary of the Communist Party of China. As field commander, Bai Jun had set up his camp on the summit to look down on those he was besieging.

"So what if that's true?" the Chinese man asked. "What if I did still have some longing in my heart? Would that be a crime? I've detached myself from my previous existence, yes. But that's no reason to condemn my previous decisions. We are grown adults. Each of us has a past life. Isn't that right, System Administrator Bull?"

The insinuation was obvious. Reginald Bull had spent a lifetime serving the United States...until they had bumped into the Arkonides on the Moon, and all of a sudden none of the old convictions applied anymore, no matter how unshakeable they had seemed. For Bull, who was obsessed with technology, one look at the Arkonide ship had been an eye-opener. A steel sphere close to five hundred meters in diameter. A steel sphere that flew through the stars. Impossible but real. And Bull was a realist.

"That's true," the astronaut conceded. His racing pulse slowed only marginally. His rage kept it at a high frequency. "But I'm wondering if your change of heart is really all that permanent. Why, I keep asking myself, do I see soldiers everywhere in the city again? Chinese soldiers? Why do we drive Chinese vehicles, eat from Chinese dishware, and dig with Chinese shovels?"

"Are you prejudiced?"

"No. I have eyes in my head, that's all. I'm wondering if your army actually won the war for Terrania after all."

"You're seeing ghosts."

"Am I? Then why have your soldiers formed a perimeter around Terrania? Why have they set up checkpoints on the roads?"

"They are *our* soldiers, Mr. Bull," Bai Jun corrected. "Soldiers of the Terran Union. But your questions are easy to answer: we're using the Chinese equipment because we don't have anything else. And we're guarding our borders because we're otherwise defenseless. We need the soldiers."

“What for? To me, things seem a lot more peaceful around here now that Terrania’s no longer surrounded by your army.”

“For the moment, yes.”

What was going on in the man’s mind? Bull, who put a lot of stock in his intuition, ran into a wall of serenity with Bai Jun. Did this man not have any emotions? To him, Bai Jun felt more foreign than the Arkonides.

“Spare me your cynicism,” Bull chided. “You know as well as I do that something unimaginable is happening right now: humans from all over the world are breaking out of the old system.”

“As I already have,” Bai Jun remarked. “But humans are humans. It would be foolish to give too much weight to the euphoria of the first few days. The troops are giving me reports of early tensions. Most are only misunderstandings arising from differing cultural backgrounds. Sensitive interactions and such. But if we don’t watch out, the tensions will turn into disputes and confrontations.”

“You’re underestimating the people. They came to Terrania with good intentions.” Bull felt hot. The former Chinese army uniform he was wearing pinched; it was too small for the stout American.

“I have no doubt about that. But we all know what happens with noble ideals, don’t we? We cling to them right up until our stomachs start to rumble. And we’re not far from that point now. The supplies from my former army are dwindling. Replenishments are difficult to get ahold of, despite the efforts of your Homer G. Adams. The desert is teeming with deserters, ideological zealots, and common criminals. The airspace is blocked, as it’s controlled by parts of the Chinese air force that have remained loyal.”

“And despite that, we’re blocking off the city?”

“There’s no other way. We don’t know how to fill the mouths that are already here. It would be negligent to take in even more. Plus, we have to protect ourselves. Not everyone has recognized that a new era has begun. There are still millions of people on Earth clinging to the old order. They believe that everything will go back to the way it was, and that all it will take is Terrania and the two Arkonides being gone. My people have already thwarted two assassination bombing attempts.”

Bull fell silent and gazed across the desert. Two dust trails rose up on the summit of the former command hill, then wandered

suddenly down the side and onto the plain below. They had to come from vehicles. He squinted. Motorcycles? He couldn't make them out clearly enough to be sure. Literally anything was possible. Over the last few days, Bull had seen the most adventurous constructions. People who had left their old existences behind, sold their houses, used their savings to make it to Terrania. Turning them away meant betraying them. Betraying their dreams, their ideals. It wasn't right.

And yet, Bai Jun was correct. And that, Bull was forced to admit to himself, was probably the true core of his anger.

"Mr. Bull, I can understand your discomfort, believe me. However, we cannot be blind to the realities. Can I give you a taste?"

He made a hand gesture without waiting for Bull to respond, and the news streams on the displays came to life.

Tanks rolled through the streets of a city—an amateur feed recorded with a pod camera. Bull didn't recognize the location, but it had to be in one of Earth's warmer areas. Palms lined the streets. People positioned themselves in the way of the tanks. They were unarmed. Some had improvised the flag of the Terran Union out of a bedsheet: the band of the Milky Way on a dark blue background. "Stop!" the people cried. "We are all Terrans!"

A second display showed an official stream. A caption on a strip at the bottom edge read "Saint Petersburg." Hundreds of people were being carted off, bound together. "...traitors to Mother Russia," a spokesman narrated. "They will receive the punishment they deserve."

Another screen showed recordings that had to come from a drone or a helicopter. A sea of houses all the way to the horizon, criss-crossed with highways. Cars, buildings, and factories were burning. Dozens of smoke pillars were rising up; the wind pushed the fumes into a ceiling that suffocated the city. On a hill above stood a building complex reminiscent of a castle. It was snow white. Bull knew it: the Getty Center above Los Angeles. He felt a lump in the pit of his stomach. He had friends in that city.

"The images are all alike," Bai Jun said. "Everywhere on Earth, people are rising up against their governments."

"And they'll come out on top," Bull added.

"I hope so. But I'd caution against excessive optimism. The Communist Party ruled my land for close to a century. It may be

teetering at the moment, but it's far from certain that it will fall. Terrania is merely a toehold. A symbol. A potentially powerful symbol. But symbols alone won't be enough for us in the long term."

"And that's why you're deploying the same soldiers who were working so hard to capture us, even kill us, a few days ago?"

"Who else do you suggest? Terrania needs some kind of order right now. To establish the new order. My soldiers are experienced and work well together. We can fall back on robust chains of command."

"And if your oh-so-dependable soldiers decide to seize power for themselves?"

"We'd be defenseless," the man admitted without hesitation. "But they won't. They've spent their entire lives learning to be obedient. As long as we give orders, they will follow them. Besides, what alternative is there? What else would you do with my soldiers? Exclude them from Terrania's founding? Or even shoot them? You can't be serious."

"I'd never even dream of suggesting *that*. Just..."

"You just don't trust me," Bai Jun concluded for him. "That's what it boils down to. Right?"

"To be frank, no, I don't."

"Why not? If you don't believe my words, then my actions should convince you, at least. I had the opportunity to kill you. I let that opportunity pass. I switched sides and captured the general secretary of the Communist Party."

"And then let him go!"

"It was the only sensible course of action. What else should we have done with him? Put on a show trial?"

"No!"

Did nothing get to this man? The more Bull pushed him, the calmer he seemed to become.

Bull cleared his throat; his mouth was dry. "You're a smart man, Bai Jun," he said with all the calmness he could muster up. "A shrewd man. We got more than a taste of that during the siege. And I have to give you one thing: you have a way with words."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. But what really interests me isn't what you're saying, but what you're thinking. I want some insight!"

"John Marshall. The telepath." Bai Jun took a step back. Bull

couldn't help feeling a certain satisfaction.

"Yes. You got to know John. He's a man who puts himself on a high moral footing. He'd never abuse his gift. You can trust him."

"I do. If not for Mr. Marshall's assistance, there would be no city standing here right now, only a radioactive wasteland. Have you forgotten already?"

"No, of course not. But that was when your life was on the line."

Bai Jun's eyes narrowed. "You're demanding that I reveal my innermost thoughts?"

"I'm *asking* you. As soon as Marshall gets back from his current mission."

"And what happens if I refuse?"

"I'm hoping you'll see reason. There's too much at stake. I have to be sure I can trust you."

Bai Jun turned away. For a short while, he looked silently at the hill from which he had commanded the siege of the *Stardust*. Bull didn't push the former general any further. He sensed that it wouldn't add much.

"All right," Bai Jun said at last, turning back to face him. His voice was soft, resolute. "You want to know 'what makes me tick,' as you Americans say. You don't trust me. I'm familiar with that feeling." He took a step closer to Bull and craned his neck. "Look me in the eye! What do you see?"

Where was Bai Jun going with this? "A person," Bull said cautiously.

"Correct. An ordinary person. What else?"

Bull stared at the man, trying to spot something unusual. A scar, perhaps? But there was nothing there. "What's your point, Bai Jun?"

"How would you describe the shape of my eyes?"

"I..."

"Just say it. Forget about political correctness."

"Fair enough. Then...slanted?"

"Correct. Compared to yours, at least, Mr. Bull." The former general blinked. "Now think about the eyes of my officers and soldiers. You've seen hundreds of them over the last few days. Does anything stick out to you?"

Bull thought back. "Yours are less slanted right? You could almost pass for European."

Bai Jun nodded.

"And?" Bull made a dismissive hand gesture. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"For me? Everything. My father is Han Chinese, and my mother an Uighur. It's written on my face. I've belonged to China my whole life, and for my whole life my loyalty has been questioned. And yet, for my whole life, my loyalty has been unshakeable. Do you understand?"

Tears welled up in Bai Jun's eyes. Bull could tell that this was the truth. The pain was sincere. His anger vanished in an instant.

"I think so, yeah. I..."

Bai Jun reached into his uniform's breast pocket and pulled out a scrap of fabric. He held it out to show Bull. It was an American flag of the kind he and his *Stardust* crewmates had worn on their space suits and uniforms until a few days ago. Hanging threads showed that the flag had been forcibly ripped off.

"On the day I arrived in the Gobi," the former general said, "I found this flag. Up there on the hill. In the sand. Discarded without a care. By Perry Rhodan, as it soon became clear. I kept it with me."

"Only to throw it into the sand in front of Perry after that!"

"It was necessary at the time. But I picked it up again. Do you want to know why? Because it told me more about you and Rhodan than any secret service dossier. It stirred thoughts in me. And when the moment came, I followed his example."

Bai Jun reached into his pocket a second time. When his fingers appeared again, they were holding a Chinese flag. It was the same size as the American one and had similarly been ripped off a uniform.

"Since that day, I have kept both flags close to my heart. So that I never forget the erroneous path I once walked. To ensure that I never make a similar mistake ever again."

"I... I..." Bull stopped short. He had misjudged this man. He was a person like Bull. With feelings like him. He was doing his best. Like him. "Bai Jun, I want to say I'm..."

"Don't worry about it. You're not the first person to be wrong about me." Bai Jun smoothed out the two flags and gently stowed them in his breast pocket again. "Let's get down to business, shall we? What brings you to me, Mr. Bull?"

The former general had held a door open to let him save face. Bull walked through it.

“Adams,” he said. “I’m looking for our financial wiz. I was told he was with you.”

“You missed him. He’s gone down into the city.”

“What for?”

Bai Jun pursed his lips secretively. “Oh, just to fulfill a wish that he never thought would be possible...”

3.

July 25, 2036
Julian Tifflor

After seven days in the desert, the time had come. Terrania stood before him.

Julian Tifflor checked his position on the pod secured to the handlebars. He had to lower his head and look at it from an oblique angle. The desert sand had scratched the screen enough that reading it was an effort. A ticker ran along the lower edge. “Search: ‘William Tifflor.’ No matches.”

Julian swiped away the ticker with a gloved hand. He stopped the Bullet on a flat area just before the hill’s summit and waited for Mildred Orsons.

The Gobi Desert had not treated her vehicle well. As of yesterday, the motor’s performance was limited. All the same, it still ran. Mildred overtook him and they reached the summit together.

Then they stopped. Below them, on the edge of the plain that disappeared into the heat haze of the horizon, stood a city of a kind never before seen in mankind’s history. A city that was about to irrevocably push humanity into a new era.

Terrania was a young city, less than a month old. A small, manageably sized city. Its core was a circle with a diameter of around a kilometer. This was the area the Arkonide energy shield had covered until a few days ago. That shield had protected the American astronaut Perry Rhodan and his crewmates, along with the Arkonide Crest da Zoltral, from the Chinese army’s attacks.

This Rhodan, who had become a traitor to his country, had founded Terrania. As a gateway to the stars, as the capital of a new mankind that was to shake off the chains of its Earthly origins. A city for humans, but not of human construction. Arkonide robots had built it. The autonomous machines had transformed the sand and rocks of the Gobi.

Transformed it into what? It was tough to say. It looked to

Julian like the skin of a crocodile, zoomed in many times. The tightly packed buildings were like scales as they rose into hills and sunk into valleys...as if this city hadn't been built, but rather had grown out of the desert floor.

The residential buildings were unimposing; Julian estimated the tallest at ten, maybe a dozen stories. From the middle of them, a needle rose into the sky that reminded him of a rocket ready to venture out into the stars.

"Spent enough time marveling, Mr. Space Cadet?" Mildred asked roguishly.

She loved to yank his chain about his dreams of the stars. It should have annoyed him, but oddly enough, it only drew him closer to her. Mildred was different from all the other women he'd met. Julian's friends often called him a lady-killer, which he denied, but it was undeniable that he always dragged a trail of women behind him who did whatever they could to please him—and who all bored him endlessly.

With Mildred, it was never boring.

"I believe so, *Milly*," he replied.

"Watch your tongue! You'll make me mad." There was one thing that Mildred Orsons absolutely could not stand, and that was being called "Milly."

"And if I do?"

"Then you'll get to find out how you cope on your own."

Her Bullet's motor revved, and Julian found himself surrounded by a cloud of dust. When the sand settled and his coughing abated, he saw that Mildred was already halfway down again. She was taking the direct route, ignoring the road that snaked towards Terrania. It must have been laid down by the Chinese military.

Julian followed the road. Mildred was a better downhill driver. If he'd tried to keep pace with her, there was a chance of tragically breaking his neck when Terrania was close enough to touch.

He caught up to Mildred not far from the city. Neck and neck, they raced towards Terrania. Julian could have overtaken her; her stuttering motor would have made it easy. But he let it go. They had crossed the desert together, and they would reach their destination together.

But the way was blocked. Two armored vehicles stood to the left and right of the tarmac. Between them were soldiers with submachine guns. One lifted his weapon and fired a warning volley

into the air.

They braked, drove up to the blockade slowly, and stopped there. They took off their helmets. Julian counted close to two dozen soldiers. All Chinese. They wore uniforms from the People's Liberation Army, but without any insignias showing rank or nation. Instead, the soldiers wore blue armbands dotted with white points. He immediately recognized the band of the Milky Way. It was the flag of the Terran Union.

A soldier stepped over to them. "Where you want to go?" he asked in clumsy English.

"Where do you think?" Julian replied. "To Terrania, of course."

"Terrania full is. Leave!"

"What are you talking about? Terrania is free! Rhodan called us here! He called on all the people on Earth! Who are you to—"

"I don't believe it!" a voice shouted. "Royal Enfield Bullets!"

Another man approached them. He wore a former uniform too, but he was not Chinese. His skin was tanned, and he had black hair and thick chest hair that billowed out of his casually unbuttoned shirt. To Julian, he'd almost have looked like someone trying to pick up girls on the beach if not for the data visor covering the top half of his face.

The tanned man kneeled down next to Julian's motorcycle to get a close-up look. "Where did you get them?"

"Ulaanbaatar," Mildred replied.

The man stood up and slowly walked around the vehicles. The sun reflected off his visor. Julian saw his own reflection: a boy's face despite the desert dust that had found its way into his helmet and stuck to him, and despite the sparse beard that had grown in the past few days. The protective goggles he had been wearing under his helmet for extra protection had left white lines around his eyes, making them look bigger, as if they belonged to a manga character. His dreamy eyes, Mildred always called them.

"Indian army supplies," said the tanned man, more to himself than to Julian and Mildred. "Decommissioned. Or looted." He reached out and ran his hand along the tank of Mildred's motorcycle as if stroking a cat. "How long did it take you?"

"Seven days."

"You were lucky. There are a lot of psychos roaming around in the desert right now. Not all of them are as nice as the boys here."

"These 'nice boys' greeted us with gunfire," Mildred interjected.

She didn't like it when anyone told her what to do, or what not to do.

"Old habits die hard. Give it time." The man shrugged. "Your motor's not running as well as it was, huh?" He clapped up his visor for a clearer look at the Mildred's Bullet and its stuttering motor. The man's left eye was missing. A metal socket had been put in the hole, with an artificial eyeball embedded in it.

"What happened to you?" Mildred asked.

"Oh, the eye." He didn't look up from the motorcycle as he spoke. "A Chinese soldier had his finger faithfully on the trigger when the energy shield finally fell." He wiped a tube with his finger to clean it of oil-smeared sand. "Luckily, the Chinese are well equipped. They brought people who know how to replace a shot-out eye." He sniffed at the dirt on his finger and stood up. "It's better than the old one. Goes all the way into the infrared spectrum. And that's just Chinese technology. I'm excited to find out what an Arkonide eye would bring to the table."

"What's going to happen to us now?" Julian asked. "We..."

"You'll come in, of course. Would be a shame to turn away the Bullets." He turned to the Chinese soldier and long-windedly explained why they had to make an exception in this case. In English. The Chinese man replied in his own mother tongue—and they both seemed to understand each other.

"All good," the tanned man said at last. "You can pass. Without the motorcycles, though. The boys'll bring them into the city afterwards."

"How do you know that? You weren't speaking the same language."

"Oh, that!" He put a finger on the headset in his ear. "TerraNet takes care of that for us."

"TerraNet?"

"The computer network me and a few friends cobbled together. The Chinese brought a ton of computing power with them. We're getting good use out of it. For real-time translation, for example. It's still a little bumpy and doesn't work for every language pair, but it's better than nothing. If there's one thing this city needs, it's help with communication." He patted one of the Bullets as if it pained him to say goodbye. "It's best if you bring everything with you that you'll need for the first few days."

Julian and Mildred removed their heavy overalls and put on

lighter clothing, then took the backpacks they had prepared for emergencies. Then, with mixed feelings, they left the Bullets with the soldiers.

"I'm Julio, by the way," the man introduced himself as they headed to the city on foot.

"Julian Tifflor."

"Mildred Orsons."

"American?"

"Not for much longer, hopefully. And you?"

"Spanish." Julio laughed. "Formerly." He slid his visor down and walked faster.

Julian and Mildred followed him as best they could. It was midday now, and the temperature must have climbed to almost forty degrees C. Their limbs had also gotten stiff after a week's ride.

Julio came to a halt at the edge of the city. "Welcome to the terrarium of humanity!" He bowed theatrically. "The place where nothing is impossible—and everything has to be made possible first." He pointed at the city. "We distinguish between two parts: the inner and outer city. The inner city was built by Arkonide robots during and after the siege. Not much is happening on that front anymore."

"Why not?"

"The robots are breaking down. There are no replacement parts and no one qualified to service them. The Gobi is merciless even to Arkonide miracle machines."

"But there's still work being done on that rocket," said Mildred, pointing to the tower that stretched into the sky in the middle of the city. "I see robots."

"That's the one exception: the Stardust Tower. It's the center of the city. Rhodan and Bull and their closest confidants have taken up residence there. But the Stardust Tower isn't a rocket or a spacecraft, just a building. So they say, anyway. The robots still left are working on the tower."

They kept going. A foundation pit opened up before them. Inside was a digger and (Julian estimated) several hundred people deepening the hole with shovels. The digger was not running.

"There's a joke in this city: the Chinese army's folding shovel is the *real* symbol of Terrania. We've inherited several million of them from the siege army. Someone in Beijing must have really been wishing the soldiers well."

“What’s wrong with the digger?”

“It ran out of gas three days ago.” Julio waved them on. “Come on, before the sun burns my visor to ashes!”

They passed by a handful of other foundation pits and three buildings that had already been completed by hand. They reminded Julian of the crooked dwellings he had seen in a slum outside of Lhasa a few months prior.

Then they finally entered the inner city. The heat suddenly dropped, replaced by a comfortable coolness. Julian craned his neck upwards. He couldn’t see the sky. It was as though the buildings’ walls slanted diagonally outwards, like the sides of a funnel, forming a closed ceiling over the city.

“The buildings absorb the daytime heat and keep the city cool,” Julio explained. “At night, the process is reversed, and the buildings give off the warmth they’ve stored up. Here in the desert it’s uncomfortably cold even in summer.”

“Boy, you don’t need to tell us that,” Mildred interjected.

“I believe you there.”

Julio led them into the center. The streets were filled with people. The majority appeared to be Chinese, but it looked to Julian as though every ethnic group, every nation on Earth was represented in Terrania. And everywhere, people sat together and talked, tablets on their laps.

“We’re trying to crack some Arkonide knowledge,” Julio clarified. “Reginald Bull managed to copy part of the database the Arkonides built into the *Stardust*. It’s only fragments, but every crumb from their table could be immeasurably valuable for us.”

At last they reached the foot of the Stardust Tower. The first floor was an open space without walls. Columns several meters thick represented the base on which the tower rested. Tables were dotted about.

“The contact point for new arrivals and coordination center for work duty,” said Julio. “Here you’ll be assigned a job and a place to sleep. Just go to any free table. As you can see, it’s not all that busy here.”

“A little anachronistic, isn’t it?” said Mildred. “Your TerraNet should be able to handle the coordination without issue.”

“It does...as long as the network hasn’t frozen. We’re in the early beta phase, if that. Besides, there are some things that are still better handled face to face. Like this.” He grabbed at his armband.

“You want to be Terrans, right?”

“Yes!” they both answered in concert.

“Go on, then!” He clapped his visor down. “Please excuse me. I’m needed elsewhere.” With a “See you later!” he did an about face and disappeared into the crowd.

When night fell, Julian and Mildred were sitting on a bench that had been improvised from a worn-out ammunition box and eating their dinner: a bowl of rice and soy sauce. There hadn’t been any water; they drank the last of their own supplies. Around them squatted dried up bushes. This square was designated as a park, one of many hidden around Terrania’s inner city.

They were exhausted. At the Stardust Tower they had been given armbands, headsets, and a promise of being assigned work the next day. They’d spend the rest of the day aimlessly wandering through the city attempting to dovetail the real Terrania with their dreams. Mildred seemed to manage it, but Julian... The worries about his father wouldn’t leave him alone. There was still no trace of him.

He switched off the pod, angry with himself. He’d cut ties with his father to follow his dreams, hadn’t he? Now he was exactly where he had longed to be, and he still kept thinking about him.

Julian looked up. It was a clear night, but he couldn’t see the sky. The buildings formed that closed, protective roof above them.

“So, this is Terrania,” he whispered. He fiddled with the armband that he’d received at the Stardust Tower. It kept slipping out of place.

“Disappointed?” Mildred asked.

“Honestly, yeah, I am. I pictured it differently. Everyone is preoccupied with burrowing into the desert with folding shovels.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. “Not what you’d hoped, I know. But this is just the beginning. They’re laying the foundations. Perry Rhodan—”

“Is only a man. One nobody’s seen for days. How are we supposed to reach for the stars when we’re digging into the ground?” Julian knew that was unfair, and that knowledge only riled him up even more. “We could be anywhere on the planet! You even get the standard-issue crackpots going around with flyers.” He nodded in the direction of an old, hunched man wandering around between the groups in the park, pushing pieces of paper into their hands.

As if the man had heard him, he came over to them. Julian guessed he was about seventy. He wore a suit that must have been expensive once. Many years ago. Now it was threadbare and mended with patches on the knees and elbows.

"Here, for you!" The old man held out a piece of paper to them. From his accent, he had to be British.

Julian tried to ignore him, but Mildred took the paper. It was a banknote. Depicted on it were a spaceman with a bulky helmet and a rocket Julian recognized as the *Stardust*. On the right-hand side was a large number ten and below that, the word "Solar."

"Cute," said Mildred approvingly. "Did you paint it yourself?"

"You could say that. And duplicated by my own hand."

Unambiguously a crackpot. And yet, also not. He was too serene. Mildred's comment seemed not to affect him, nor did Julian's pointed silence.

"What for?" Mildred asked.

"A new era needs a new currency, doesn't it?"

She considered a moment, then replied, "Maybe. Or maybe a new era doesn't need a currency at all?"

"That day will come. But for now, this should do. Everyone can have as much of it as they want." The man reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a bundle of the bills.

"Homemade money? Everyone can have as much of it as they want? You're dreaming!"

"Yes. But if there's one thing I've learned, it's that you have to take your dreams into your own hands to make them come true. Would you two be here otherwise?"

Mildred looked from the bills to the man and then back at the bills. "You have a point. But in that case, why are you stuck in the past?" She pointed to the spaceman's head. Perry Rhodan's face, presumably. "A white man. The twentieth century ended a *long* time ago."

"Correct. Why don't you turn it over?"

She did so. A black woman adorned the other side of the bill.

"And again."

A new face. An Asian man. Mildred turned the bill over again and saw yet another face.

"How did you do this?" she asked him.

"Arkonide knowledge. Anyone who can build ships that travel among the stars has to have a few more tricks up their sleeve." The

old man put the wad of bills away again and turned to Julian, who was pretending to have no interest in the conversation. “You don’t look happy, boy. You don’t like Terrania?”

“I…” Julian felt his face flushing. This crazy old guy had seen right through him! “No. I don’t.” He said it spitefully, coming across like a little kid.

“It’s not the way you imagined it, I suppose?”

“I thought that if we came here, we’d be able to sense the stars.”

“I understand.”

The old man gave a knowing nod, a gesture Julian knew all too well from his father, and that provoked him to incandescence.

The stranger continued, “Maybe I can help you.”

“Oh yeah? How?” Julian tried to sound contemptuous.

“I think there’s someone you should meet,” he said, as if he hadn’t registered the undertone. He took a banknote out, wrote two numbers on it, and gave it to Julian. “Here. I promise you this will change your mind.”

4.

July 25, 2036
Perry Rhodan

"Six more minutes!" called Thora da Zoltral in flawless English.

The Arkonide held her head straight, her gaze directed at the narrow river valley the Hawk helicopter was following. She was nonchalantly holding the control stick between her thumb and index finger, keeping the vehicle so close to the torrential flow that Rhodan thought he could see fish in the spray.

Their low altitude was risky but necessary. They needed the element of surprise. Their chances of that weren't bad, at least. Thora flew the Hawk as if she'd spent her entire life doing nothing but flying primitive aircraft on backwater planets. The Arkonide was truly immersed in her task.

Rhodan, who was standing in the doorway between the cockpit and the passenger cabin, too nervous to stay seated, caught himself looking wide-eyed at her features reflected in the glass. She had dark hair instead of white now, and blue eyes instead of red. Her paleness had been replaced by the healthy, tanned complexion of an athlete. Creases at the corners of her eyes marked her as being over forty. An energetic woman of distinction. A woman you'd think capable of being chief of staff to the president of the United States. The makeup artist Mercant had arranged for and brought to the airstrip had done first-class work.

But it wasn't the image of an Arkonide transformed into a human that gave Rhodan pause. It was what was missing: the haughtiness, the dismissiveness, had been wiped from her face. In these minutes, the Arkonide Thora da Zoltral had finally come to Earth, had shed the burden of her origins.

"Watch out!" cried Mercant, who was watching their course on a display. "We're approaching the first outpost!"

The former agent had taken the copilot's seat next to the alien. He straightened his suit jacket, making sure that the grip of his

weapon showed at his chest. His role in their plan was the easiest. He just had to play the role he'd spent his life playing: the unshakeable secret service man, entirely focused on his work.

The helicopter's turbines roared as Thora pushed it into a tight curve. Rhodan held on tight to the back of Mercant's seat as the g-force pushed him towards the floor. A moose bolted out of the way, surprised by the aircraft. It disappeared into the thick woods that covered most of the Adirondacks. This landscape in Upstate New York was untouched by humans.

Almost. And that was why they had returned to the country Rhodan had cut all ties with.

"Everything okay?" He turned and looked into the passenger cabin. Their crewmates were there, waiting to be deployed, each trying to calm their nerves in their own way.

Sid González, the young Latino, had sunk deep into his chair and was playing with his pod. He had flung out his knees as if he were a normal teenager dying of boredom on a long trip. Sid had apparently been much heavier a month earlier, but he was scrawny now. He had pushed his gift to its limits and beyond, and it was eating him from the inside. What the boy really needed was rest. But he was critical to their plans. Sid was a teleporter. He could move himself and others to different locations by the power of thought alone.

John Marshall, the contemplative former investment banker who was like a father to Sid, was sitting up straight. Quiet, punctilious Marshall was the only one who had fastened his seat belt as directed. The telepath—he was capable of reading other people's thoughts—had his eyes closed, as if he were lost in thought or had forgotten about the world around him. Or was he only *acting* that way?

Anne Sloane was crouching on the edge of the seat farthest away from Marshall, wiry and ready to pounce. As a former surfer, she possessed an exceptional sense of balance...alongside other, hidden talents. She and Marshall had gotten closer to each other in the last few days. Perhaps too close. Marshall's gift made him extraordinary—and extraordinarily sensitive. This passionate but erratic woman with telekinetic abilities undoubtedly held a considerable attraction for him. And she undoubtedly hurt him deeply, over and over against her own will.

Sid was wearing shorts and a T-shirt with a print of the Milky

Way. An arrow pointing to a corner of the galaxy was labeled “You are here!” Sid was to hide in the helicopter before landing. A teenager on board Marine One would raise suspicion in an instant.

Marshall wore a suit, Anne a conservatively cut women’s suit. At first glance, they looked (Rhodan hoped, at least) like ordinary government officials. And they wouldn’t allow anyone a second glance, or a longer one. Sid, John, and Anne were their reserves, their life insurance.

“Visual contact!” cried Mercant.

The former secret agent pointed down and to the right. Rhodan turned around, followed the outstretched hand with his eyes, and saw a site secured with sandbags. Two surprised soldiers tried in vain to point their heavy machine gun towards the helicopter. A third held a com device to the side of his head.

They’d been noticed.

“They’re coming,” said Thora. It was an assessment, nothing more.

Above them, black dots emerged from the blue sky, rapidly growing larger. Autonomous drones. They took up pursuit of the helicopter and shot at it. The bow chasers’ barrels jerked around to try and get the intruder in their sights.

Thora paid them no mind. She reduced the thrust as the tight gorge opened into a wide valley. Wetlands stretched along its floor, dotted with small conifer groves. An unpaved road wound its way over a ridge and then in a serpentine path into the valley, from there going north in a straight line. It was cluttered with military vehicles, fuel tankers and articulated trucks escorted by armored vehicles. Among them were occasional all-terrain vehicles using every little gap to gain a few meters in the traffic’s slow crawl.

“The treasure we’re after must be exceptionally important to your president,” Thora remarked sardonically. Her moment of being wrapped up in the here and now was over; the proud Arkonide in her had gotten the upper hand again.

“He’s not my president anymore,” Rhodan retorted, more bitingly than planned.

“Of course. I forgot. *You’re* the president now.”

At least for the next few hours. Rhodan touched the new mask he was wearing. He’d gained wrinkles, thin lips, and protruding ears; he had aged two decades. Once Mercant’s specialist was finished with him, a stranger had stared back at him from the

mirror. A man in his mid-fifties. Gaunt, resolute. Stanley Drummond, president of the United States of America. The man who had ordered the Arkonide expedition ship on the Moon to be destroyed. Who had put Crest da Zoltral on trial and spared no effort trying to bring Rhodan and his comrades to heel. The man who would do *anything* to reestablish the illusion that humanity was alone in the universe and was the pinnacle of creation.

Before the flight to New York, Rhodan had spent three days mastering Drummond's body language and speech patterns. The president always sounded slightly hoarse, the long-term result of a war injury. Rhodan had declined an operation on his vocal cords, instead trying to imitate the sound himself, with some success. "Realer than the real thing!" Reginald Bull had claimed when they parted, clapping him on the shoulder. "All you have to do is clear your throat and those drill-sergeant types will fall over themselves to serve you. You'll see!"

There was a crackling in Rhodan's earpiece. "Unknown helicopter! You are over a restricted military zone. Turn around immediately!"

Mercant took care of replying. "Tell me, are you actually blind?" he barked into the microphone by his mouth.

A few seconds of static followed as the man tried to maintain his composure. "Who do you think you are? You—"

"Take it easy," Mercant interrupted. "Your drones are buzzing around us like irritating flies. Have you thought, even for one second, to look at the footage their cameras are sending you?"

"Of course. You—"

"Then stop talking crap! This is Marine One."

Static in the earpiece. The soldier was overwhelmed by this sudden twist.

Mercant gave him a moment to get his senses back. "Do you know what that means?"

"The president...sir?"

"Correct. The president of the United States of America, Stanley Drummond. And if you want to have even the *slightest* prospect of keeping your rank, instruct your drones to stop aiming for the president's helicopter. Got it?"

"Of... Of course, sir!"

The guns' barrels jerked away. The interception squad turned into an escort. For the moment.

“Well done, kid,” Mercant praised him in a fatherly manner. “Name and rank?”

“Sergeant Michael Snider, sir! P... Please excuse my hastiness. We never expected the president. We’d heard you were in Los Angeles to personally see to the revolts and—”

“I’ll give you some advice, kid: if you want to get anywhere in life, never listen to rumors.”

“Yes, sir! I’ll take that to heart!”

“I hope so. And now kindly put the commander of this operation on the line for me. Is that clear?”

“Right away, sir!”

The static died. Mercant turned to Rhodan. “Well? How’d I do?” Mercant, who was approaching sixty-five, grinned like a little boy who’d managed to pull off a prank right under the teacher’s nose.

“Not bad,” Thora replied. “We’d accept you as a cadet in the Imperial fleet.”

“Really? I thought your fleet was no place for barbarians.”

Mercant was prodding at the Arkonide’s pride. Rhodan expected a sharp rebuke, but instead Thora pulled her lips into a scathing smile. “Of course. As a man of the world, you know that every fleet has an unquenchable need for idealists ready to die for a just cause. No?”

Mercant’s grin froze into a mask. “I have no intention of—”

He broke off when a new voice rang from their earpieces. “General Joshua de Soto here. What is it?” The voice was loud and assertive.

De Soto. Mercant’s head jerked up. He took a deep breath and said, “I’ll gladly explain it all to General Harrison, the man in command of—”

De Soto cut him off. “Harrison is currently in an anteroom of the Pentagon filling in his request for early retirement. He was relieved of his command four hours ago. What do you want?”

Mercant cast a questioning glance at Rhodan. This change in commander was unexpected. Was it a reason to abort their mission, however? Rhodan shook his head.

Mercant replied, “President Drummond is here to check on the progress of—”

“I figured *that* part out already. Now give me my old buddy Stanley!”

My old buddy. De Soto knew Drummond personally! The general

would see through Rhodan in minutes. It was over before it had begun.

Mercant switched off the transmitter. “Rhodan, we have to abort! We can’t fool this de Soto. Sid should teleport us all out of the helicopter before the general or any of the other soldiers smell a rat!”

Rhodan didn’t reply. Mercant was right; that was the only way. They could still get away unrecognized.

He looked out of the cockpit. Thora remained on course, aiming straight for the collection of buildings in front of them. Some of them had burned down. Twisted steel frames rose from a black pile of ashes. Fort Sunrise. The place where the mutant Clifford Monterny had come within an inch of killing her mentor, Crest—and Thora herself.

A few hundred meters upriver was the reason they had come: a large, round tent tarpaulin measuring around a hundred meters across. Dozens of armored vehicles surrounded it, forming a corral.

Hidden under this tarpaulin was the Arkonide ship Thora had used to save Crest, as well as Rhodan and Bull, at the last minute. A steel sphere with a diameter of sixty meters. A technological marvel that far exceeded even the most audacious dreams of the former astronaut. Not a rocket, a true starship. A ship that to Rhodan represented the key to survival and, to humanity, the gateway to the stars.

Rhodan thought about the flight to New York and the sight of a burning Manhattan shaken by violence. He recalled the “Good God!” from Jenny Luwalski, the vivacious young woman who just wanted to live her life and whose unbearable fear had made her flee in blind fury.

Perry Rhodan couldn’t turn back. He cleared his throat, soaking in the throaty tone. Then he switched his own transmitter to send. “Joshua, you old rascal. Stanley here. We’ll talk later, okay? Where can we land?”

“Sure thing!” came the answer. “Tell your pilot to follow the drones.”

The drones accelerated. Thora cast him a questioning glance. The Arkonide looked focused; the sudden twist hadn’t provoked any fear at all.

“Follow them!” Rhodan ordered.

Thora did as he said.

5.

July 26, 2036
Reginald Bull

"Good morning, Reg!"

The voice was calm and friendly. Bull knew it. He pulled off the old T-shirt he had rolled up and rested over his eyes to keep the morning sun from blinding him. His apartment in the Stardust Tower—or his "cabin," as he called it, given its cramped size—offered no shade from the sun. Not yet. That was on the way, he'd been promised by the Arkonide robot he'd given a good talking to. As soon as the tower had reached its final height. One day. Until then, he had to make do.

"Eric!" he said. "It's 6:30 am. You better have a valid medical reason for dragging me out of bed in the middle of the night."

Eric Manoli had been the *Stardust*'s onboard doctor and was perhaps the most dependable person Bull had ever met. The unimposing black-haired man said, "Here, your medicine!" He presented a large cup. The aroma of coffee wafted out of the narrow drinking spout. "Americano. Three shots of espresso, six sugars."

Bull sat up, snatched the cup out of his friend's hand, and sipped from it. Hot and bittersweet, just how he liked it. "Okay, I've swallowed your bait. What do you want from me?"

"To show you something."

"Okay, then show me!"

"It doesn't work like that. You have to come with me."

Bull took a second, longer gulp. "No can do. The city planners and geologists are waiting for me. Terrania needs a reliable water supply."

"Sure. But if you ask me, Terrania's water supply doesn't need Reginald Bull. Leave that to the experts. They can do it better anyway. Your strengths lie elsewhere."

Bull stared at his friend, stunned. Manoli had sort of been the gray mouse of the *Stardust* crew. Quiet and unobtrusive. He often

stayed silent, but when he *did* speak, he regularly left Bull's jaw hanging open.

"All right already." Bull told his pod to cancel the appointment, threw off the covers and got up. He was still wearing the same decommissioned Chinese uniform he'd fallen asleep in the night before.

"You sleep in your clothes?" Manoli curled an eyebrow, roughly the maximum amount of surprise he'd ever shown.

"Of course. I leave all that wretched dressing and undressing to people who can do it better." Bull went to the door, which opened automatically. In the doorway, he turned around and said with a chuckle, "What are you waiting for? Or have you not drunk any of your own medicine yet this morning?"

Together, they climbed down the anti-grav shaft to the tower's base. It was an experience that quickly discombobulated the human brain: you had to push off from the ropes, but *downwards*. Thanks to their astronaut training, though, it wasn't difficult for Bull and Manoli.

You just never know when something'll come in handy, Bull thought, remembering his loud objections to exercises that had seemed so pointless at the time. But Lesly K. Pounder, the flight director of NASA, had gritted his teeth at Bull. The latter had finally given in, never suspecting that these exercises would prove so useful one day. He had suspected even less that one day he would be living with the old dog Pounder in a tower built by alien robots. A tower in a city in the desert that was intended to be a new capital city for all of mankind.

They reached the bottom of the shaft, which was also the ceiling of the foyer. "Over here, Reg!" Manoli veered directly into the warren of rooms that had been created within the last ten days.

The hospital was the former *Stardust* doctor's opus. It was equipped with—what else?—former Chinese army stocks, top-quality material that Manoli hoped to supplement with Arkonide technology in the not-too-distant future. It was staffed with first-rate doctors and nurses from several dozen nations. So far they were working without pay, even if the financial genius Homer G. Adams had promised that would change soon. Bull's objection that Earth's currencies wouldn't be worth more than the paper they were printed on soon anyway due to the global unrest did nothing to

bend the man out of shape.

"How are things going here, Eric?" he asked. Hospital beds lined the corridors. Most of them were empty, but every so often they passed a patient. There wasn't much to see. They were asleep, with liquid flowing into their bodies drip by drip from infusion bottles.

"Better, thankfully." The doctor walked so quickly that it was hard work for Bull to keep up with him. "I think the worst is behind us. In the first few days, we primarily had two kinds of patients: some with gunshot wounds and a very, very large number who were weak and dehydrated. Since the siege ended, we've only had three more gunshot wounds, two of which were caused by accidents while collecting the weapons. Dehydration comes up rarely now too. Maybe one or two dozen people every day who overstrain themselves during their work duties.

"And despite that, you still have to outsource people to the hallways?"

"I'm afraid so. Thanks to Sid González, the atom bomb planted by the Chinese secret service detonated some distance from Terrania. Off in the desert, which is devoid of people...in theory. In practice, it wasn't. Think about the many thousands who tried to press towards the shield. Radiation is invisible. Hundreds, no, thousands were hit by excessive doses, even though it was supposedly a "clean" bomb. On top of that, you have the careless and ignorant people who ignore the restricted zone around the explosion site."

"Can you help them?"

"To some extent. Truthfully, our medicine is still almost useless against radiation poisoning. We can provide some relief and give their bodies support. Not much more." It was clear on Manoli's face that he didn't like this at all. He was a doctor in his heart and soul.

"What about the Arkonides?" Bull asked.

"No luck there. Neither Crest nor Thora have a medical background. From what I *have* learned from them, Arkonide medicine isn't much better than ours anyway."

"Hard to believe that." Bull ran a hand through his crew cut. "Their whole civilization relies on the energy from nuclear fusion, something we've been trying to figure out for centuries without making more than a millimeter of progress. They build starships with masses of thousands of tonnes that fly from star system to star

system, but when something goes wrong, all they can do is throw their hands in the air. Crazy."

"Yeah, it's crazy." Manoli paused for a moment's thought. "But almost shockingly human in a way, right? Our species isn't exactly a high-flyer when it comes to solving homemade catastrophes." He came to a stop by a door before Bull could reply. "Here we are."

Manoli opened the door. A treatment room awaited Bull. In the middle of it was a bed surrounded by countless pieces of equipment —the finest Earth's medical technology had to offer. A large cardboard box had been placed on the bed; Bull estimated it was about two meters long. He couldn't help being reminded of a coffin. A label stuck to the side read "Medical Supplies." It hung crooked.

A human and an alien stood by the bed. Dr. Frank Haggard, the medical Nobel Prize winner, was just pulling on rubber gloves. Like Manoli, he was dressed in white. However, while the more slender and unassuming Manoli could be recognized as an intellectual straight away, the muscular Haggard looked like a model you'd cast in a medical drama. Not without reason: the Australian was a former professional rugby player and didn't let a day go by without training. Rumor going around the Stardust Tower was that he'd already started up a Terran rugby team.

Beside him, leaning on a cane for support, was Crest da Zoltral. Two weeks ago, the old Arkonide had been marked for death. If Manoli and Haggard hadn't saved him, he would have succumbed to his fate. Crest looked gaunt—fragile, even—but a fire had awakened in his red eyes that told Bull the Arkonide wasn't even close to ready to bid farewell to life.

"There you two are!" Haggard greeted them. "Can we finally make a start?" The doctor beamed expectantly, like a boy who couldn't wait to open a present.

"What do you have there?" Bull asked. "Some new high-tech medical toy?"

"Something like that."

Manoli put rubber gloves on too. Together, the two doctors set about opening the box. They used scalpels, drawing the blades as carefully along the cardboard as if they were cutting human tissue. A smell spread across the room. Bull contorted his face. Not a smell. A *stench*. A mixture of fried plastic and burned flesh.

The doctors had cut through the box all the way around at a height of around twenty centimeters. The part they'd separated slid

to the side. Manoli and Haggard grabbed it, nodded to each other, then lifted it up and put it to one side.

Bull stepped over to the bed. The cup slipped out of his hand. The vessel bounced off the floor; the lid fell off. A steaming brown liquid spilled out.

Before him lay the remains of a human. Little more than a head and torso were left of him. The legs were cut off in the middle of the upper thigh; the left arm was missing entirely. The right arm lay to the side, twisted several times in ways that should have been impossible. The body was scorched, his skin charred and shriveled. Or were those the remains of clothes that had burned into his skin?

The aroma of coffee mixed with the stench of burned flesh. Bull felt sick. He'd been fortunate enough to only encounter death a few times so far in his life. One of those encounters had followed him in nightmares for years afterward. It had been an auto accident on the road connecting Nevada Fields and Las Vegas. A straight line through the desert with barely any traffic. And yet, bad accidents happened there again and again when personnel from the space center were coming back after a weekend of heavy partying. Bull had been the first one on the scene. He'd had to watch, helpless, as the old gasoline-powered car's occupants had burned to death after the tank caught fire.

"Wh... What are you doing with a corpse?" Bull managed to ask, registering out of the corner of his eye that Crest appeared unmoved. The old Arkonide was no doubt acquainted with death. "Who is he?"

"It's not a dead man, Reg," Manoli replied. "Look closer!"

"I've seen enough. I—"

"Look at his rib cage!"

Bull didn't want to, but he'd have trusted Manoli with his life anytime. He forced himself to step right up to the bed. The corpse's head was turned to the right, away from him. Bull was glad of that. He didn't want to look the dead man in the eye.

The rib cage was open, as if turned inside out. The opening was a black hole—and inside, something metallic glimmered under the light of the strong lamps.

"Well? Any light bulbs coming on?" Manoli asked.

"A robot?"

A moment later, a memory flashed in Bull's mind. The base in the Adirondacks. Fort Sunrise. Crest, taken hostage by Clifford

Monterny. He and Rhodan in a desperate attempt to free the old Arkonide. A figure in an Arkonide battledress had rushed to help Crest only to be killed by the telekinetically gifted Roster Deegan. He and Rhodan had thought it was Thora. They had been wrong...

"Rico," said Crest, answering in Bull's stead. "The machine that saved all our lives."

"How did... How did *he* get here?" Rico had been a robot. Not a person, not a human. "It" would have been more accurate. But something in Bull bristled against the impersonal pronoun.

"Adams, Mercant, and Pounder orchestrated it," Manoli replied.

"By way of bribery, agent smarts, and bullheaded stubbornness?"

Manoli laughed. Before, Bull remembered, his jokes had never raised more than a guilty smile from the doctor. "More or less. You and the others had to get away as quickly as possible after Monterny's death. The army captured Fort Sunrise and immediately hit upon the jackpot: the crashed Arkonide ship. They secured Rico as well, but only incidentally."

"And then Adams strolled in with his big briefcase?"

"Exactly. The rest was achieved by turncoat secret service agents and Pounder's astrophiles, along with black market traders scattered across the globe who are used to earning a living by smuggling medicine and endangered species."

By now, Haggard had cut off the rest of the box's sides. All that was left was the cardboard under the head. "I'm ready," he said. "Shall we get started?"

"Will you excuse me, Reg?" Manoli turned away, took a headset off a shelf and whispered, "Minutes of the autopsy of..." He hesitated. "Unknown being with the name Rico. Doctors performing the autopsy: Dr. Frank Haggard and Dr. Eric Manoli. We'll begin with the documentation."

Moving camera arms came out from under the bed and slowly traveled over the mangled body.

"Not bad," said Bull approvingly. "Do you two even have to do anything?" He had a passion for gadgets, but in this moment the remark helped shake off his anxiety.

"Yeah, later," Haggard replied. "When we cut him up."

Bull didn't say anything. The camera arms folded up again. A narrow pipe slid forward and positioned itself over the entire bed. A red light flashed on, and shortly after that an irregular rattling

droned from the pipe.

"Don't worry," Haggard said pointedly. "No one's knocking. It's normal for an MRI to sound like this." He looked at his pod. "This'll take a few minutes."

The three humans and the Arkonide were silent. After a while, Crest asked, "Do you think back on the fight with Monterny, Mr. Bull?"

"You don't?"

"No. At least, I try not to. What's past is past. You have to move forward in life."

"That's my line." Bull ran a hand over his face. His fingers rested on the scar across his cheek. A memento from when the *Stardust* had been shot down.

"But?" the Arkonide followed up.

"I don't know." Bull pulled his hand away. "I think of myself as an affable guy, even if I do lose my temper from time to time. But ever since we set out for the Moon... Somehow someone is always coming after me. Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing wrong."

"I can understand why you would ask that question." Crest regarded him with a look of surprise at the idea of the blustering human even being capable of such profound thought processes. "But it would be better to ask the question, what are you doing *right* lately? The more other people hate you and pester you, the more strongly you should hold true to what you believe."

"You speaking from experience there?"

Crest's eyes widened. A buzzing noise sounded, and the pipe drew back, uncovering the body. It sat there unchanged.

"Let's take a look at the scan!" said Haggard, pointing to a display that filled almost half of one wall. "Please note this is only a rudimentary processing of the data readings. The coloring is chosen by the software, and the level of detail is still insufficient. But for a first impression, it's enough."

The scan confirmed their assumptions. At first. Rico was a machine. Instead of veins, conduits ran through his body; instead of organs, aggregate clusters filled his torso. At the same time, he was a life form. The skin covering his body was made of cell tissue. And not just his skin: cell tissue reached into the inside of his body, filling the cavities between wires and clusters.

Manoli and Haggard held an animated discussion, calling up one internal view of the body after another. They'd forgotten about

everything around them.

Crest fell silent. All color drained from the hand that grasped the pommel of his cane. The Arkonide was trembling.

"Are you feeling okay?" Bull asked. He supported the Arkonide with a hand under his arm, feeling a lot of hard bone and very little flesh.

"It's this robot, this being. You know I'm neither an engineer nor a scientist. But history, the precise observation of societies, is my field. I have learned about a great many things, including technology."

"You know about this kind of robot?"

"No!" Crest firmly shook his head in a gesture he had inadvertently picked up from the humans. "That's exactly it. This machine is *not* of Arkonide origin!"

Bull eyed the old alien, whose eyes welled with tears of strong emotion. Then he looked at the remains on the bed. Not of Arkonide origin—but then, who *had* built this machine that possibly wasn't a machine at all? And how had it ended up on a forgotten Arkonide base on Venus? And why had Rico presented himself as an Arkonide...while using a name from Earth?

Crest's statement raised countless questions. But Bull didn't have a chance to ask them. The door opened without a knock, and a woman stepped into the room. She was thin, with dark, mid-length brown hair and a piercing gaze that Bull found abhorrent.

"What do *you* want?" he asked loudly instead of offering a greeting.

"She" was Tatiana Michalovna. She came from Great Russia, could read minds, and until twenty days earlier had been a willing accomplice of the nefarious Clifford Monterny. Right up until the last moment, the battle at Fort Sunrise. Bull would have left her there, but Rhodan had insisted on bringing her to Terrania. That was why the telepath, whom Bull did not trust one bit, was freely walking around the city. Now she stood in this room where she didn't remotely belong, with the remains of a mysterious machine she should have had no idea was in Terrania.

"I want to talk to Crest," she said.

"Come back another time. As you can see, he's busy right now."

"I'm sure Crest da Zoltral can spare a few minutes for me." She fixed the Arkonide with her penetrating gaze, paying no mind to the grotesque, charred remains of Rico. "Isn't that right?"

It sounded almost like a threat, and the Arkonide succumbed to it.

"I believe I can." Crest released himself from Bull's grasp.

It was too much. A lump formed in Bull's throat. The rage rose up in him, gained the upper hand, and...

And the observant Eric Manoli intervened. "The detailed data analysis will take an hour. Until then, there's nothing to do here. Will that be long enough for your conversation, Miss Michalovna?"

6.

July 25, 2036
Mildred Orsons

"This must be the place!"

Mildred and Julian had spent a good hour wandering around lost in Terrania. The place had proven itself more varied and full of nooks and crannies than they had assumed. And emptier too; no one was to be seen in this part of the city. The people had to either be asleep or working on the fringes of the city. Judging by all the scraping noises in the distance, she was pretty sure she was right about that one. And why not? If you were going to dig foundations in the desert with folding shovels, you might as well do it in the cool of the night.

The two stopped in front of a squat building that was in no way distinct from those around it. With one easily overlooked exception: someone had scrawled two letters on the wall in chalk: E. E.

Mildred rested a hand on the letters. The wall was soft and hard at the same time, as if she were touching an animal's flank and not a solid building. A few moments later, a door appeared before them. The wall drew back like a muscle.

"Not bad at all," Mildred whispered. "Maybe that old man wasn't a crackpot like you thought."

"What would *you* call someone who walks through a park giving people homemade cash?" Julian countered. He didn't wait for her answer before walking through the opening.

Mildred didn't say anything. Julian, who was normally unshakable by nature, hadn't been the same since news of his father's disappearance had reached them in Ulaanbaatar. This was on the same day they had used the last of their money to buy the motorcycles and were poised to set out for Terrania. Julian had been faced with the choice of either following his dreams or returning to the United States to try to get to the bottom of his father's fate.

For a whole night, he had grappled with this, ultimately choosing to follow his dream. It had been the right decision, Mildred was sure. Julian wouldn't have achieved anything in the US except putting himself in danger. Homeland Security didn't appreciate it when ordinary citizens asked probing questions. And these days, the country's most powerful bureau would have even less patience than usual.

The right decision, perhaps, but the worries and self-blame weighed heavy on Julian Tifflor. Mildred suffered with him. She knew how it felt when you loved your parents so much that you couldn't stand them—but also couldn't stand to be without them.

She followed her boyfriend. Soft light glimmered. It didn't come from lamps, but directly from the walls. A staircase led downward, as the man had told them. So far, so good.

Mildred kept walking. The opening closed silently behind them. The air was warm and dry, not damp and musty as she had expected. And there was an undercurrent in the air that reminded her of a clinic.

The staircase turned to the right and led into a room about the size of the one she had occupied in her parents' house in a suburb of Seattle. But Mildred's room had been crammed full of the countless distractions typical of the offspring of the rapidly fading upper middle class. This one was virtually empty.

A bed stood in the middle. A man was lying in it, on his back, his eyes closed. His arms were outside of the covers and folded across his upper body like a corpse that a mortician had respectfully arranged for a viewing. A small display was mounted by his head. White lines, dead straight, ran from left to right on a black background.

Next to the bed sat a second man. He was bent over a tablet, softly murmuring syllables to himself. The words sounded foreign and didn't come from any language she was familiar with. The man had long hair tied into a braid.

Mildred and Julian hesitated, waiting noncommittally at the entrance. But it was too late. The man had noticed them. He looked up and said, "Come on down! Ernst and I don't bite."

Mildred shook off her reservations first. She slowly walked forward. A kind of awe had taken hold of her that she couldn't explain, as if she had entered a special place that didn't belong to this city of Terrania (which was intended to be a gateway to the

stars), but rather was more primitive than most of the cities Mildred had seen in the months she had spent traveling the world.

She stopped by the bed. The man lying before her was pale, even sallow. He had short brown hair. Stubble covered his chin. His eyes were closed. Mildred placed him as early- to mid-thirties, making him ten years older than she was. He didn't seem to be breathing; his rib cage didn't move.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"A German," the man next to the bed replied, standing up. "His name is Ernst Ellert. A Terran from the very first hour."

Ernst Ellert. That explained the "E. E." on the building.

"And you?" asked Mildred, posing the next of her many unanswered questions.

"Timothy. Timothy Harnahan. A Terran from the second or third hour." The man smiled at his mild joke. He was short and gangly, more a large boy than a grown-up despite the irregular smattering of stubble on his chin.

"What are you here for?"

"Can't you see? I'm keeping him company. Every day for two or three hours. It's a good chance to get some peace. And..." He lifted up the tablet. Mildred could see foreign letters on the display. "I get to brush up on my Arkonide a little."

"How do you know about...about Ernst Ellert?" Mildred asked. She had to force herself to say the name aloud. The man in the bed was there—and yet somehow also not. At any rate, it felt strange to speak *about* him. Did this Ernst hear what they were saying?

"An old man with a hunched back told me about him a few days ago."

"Us too!" Mildred blurted out. "He was handing out homemade banknotes."

"Then it must be the same guy. At first, you think he's a crackpot, but when you speak to him, you quickly realize he has his wits about him. He just thinks in a different way than normal people." Timothy shoved the tablet into the thigh pocket of his oversized cargo pants.

"What happened to Ernst Ellert?" Mildred came so close to the bed that she was almost touching it. She smelled a whiff of sweat, as if this unbreathing man were alive.

"He was trying to reach Perry Rhodan," Timothy replied. "With some friends, back when the Chinese army had the *Stardust*'s

landing site under siege and the Arkonide energy shield was still up. They dug a tunnel, but the Chinese caught wind of it and took them by surprise."

"The soldiers shot at him?"

From what she'd heard, the soldiers had shot at anyone who dared come too close to the shield. Mildred let her gaze fall on the man in the bed. She couldn't see any injuries. Maybe they were hidden by the covers? But she didn't think so. She didn't see any pain on his face, only a deep satisfaction of a kind she had never witnessed before.

"Yes, but they missed. At the very moment the soldiers arrived, he and his friends reached Perry Rhodan. The robots had been digging a tunnel for Rhodan, and the shield had been switched off in that location to let Ernst and his friends slip through safely. Ernst was at the front. Just as he was about to pass through into Rhodan's tunnel, the shield came on again."

"But touching an Arkonide energy shield is deadly!" Julian piped up. So far he had stayed silent, which was very unlike him. Was it the concern for his father that had left him so quiet? Or a sense of awe, perhaps?

Mildred eyed him. Julian had changed. He looked electrified, raring to go. Like the man she had met in the foothills of the Himalayas a few months earlier and instantly fallen in love with.

"It should be, yes." Timothy stroked his stubble. "But as you can see, Ernst Ellert is still in one piece. He's in a kind of hibernation, you could say. His body temperature is at a constant eight degrees Celsius, his heart beats twice an hour, and he breathes once an hour."

"How did he get here?"

"Rhodan and Bull hid him away. In all the chaos after the nuclear bomb exploded, no one took any more notice of him."

Mildred bent forward and tried to observe the man's rib cage slowly moving. She couldn't. "Don't be mad at me, Timothy, but this story sounds too unbelievable to be true. Even the coincidence that Perry Rhodan was digging a tunnel in the exact same place where Ernst and his friends were doing the same thing… The probability is so low, it's practically zero."

"I know." Timothy shrugged. "But Ernst Ellert is lying right here. And I can only tell you what Walt and KaHe told me."

"Who?"

“Walt and KaHe. That’s what they call each other. I don’t know their real names. Two friends of Ernst’s who came from Germany to the Gobi with him. They often come here and check on him. But only individually. They’re friends, but they don’t always seem to see eye to eye.”

“What do you think happened with Ernst Ellert?” Mildred took a step back again. It didn’t seem right to goggle at this strange man up like a sideshow attraction.

“If you ask KaHe, it’s a kind of shock, or a coma,” Timothy answered. “He’s convinced that we’ll get to the bottom of it as soon as we have Arkonide knowledge firmly on our side. He thinks there must be a scientific explanation for Ellert’s condition.”

“And what does Walt say?”

“Walt?” Timothy smiled when he thought of Ellert’s second friend. The smile was full of warmth, making it clear that Timothy liked this Walt guy. “Oh, just that Ernst Ellert’s soul or spirit has left his body. His friend is elsewhere, he thinks. Somewhere out there in the infinite universe. Or in other universes or other eras. Ernst Ellert was a special person, Walt says. He often dreamed. But not like other people. In his dreams, he seemed to travel to other places and times.”

Mildred and Julian looked at each other. A beautiful notion, but wasn’t it just wishful thinking?

“What do you think, Timothy?” Mildred asked.

“That if my parents had their way, I wouldn’t be keeping a vigil over this man who should be dead. That I should be helping out my dad on his farm in Kansas so I can take it over one day. Like he did with his father, and his father before him, going back almost 150 years. That I shouldn’t have run away at seventeen and should instead have reeled in a nice farmer’s daughter at my high school so my son could inherit the farm from me one day. And yet, here I am. Who’d have thought it possible?”

“Who indeed?” Mildred felt a connection with Timothy Harnahan. For as long as she could remember, her parents had had big plans for her. Both had professional titles, both placed a lot of stock in being “progressive” and raising their daughter to be a person with her own mind from early childhood—and for both of them, their world collapsed around them when Mildred had blown off a secure place at an elite university to study virology (complete with scholarship) one day, just getting on her bicycle and riding off.

For two years, Mildred had fended for herself, as a bartender, a field worker, a host in expensive clubs, a street artist. She regretted nothing; she had enjoyed the ultimate freedom of having no possessions and no idea what the next day would bring.

Then she'd met Julian and had given in to the unimaginable: a committed relationship. Next to that, heading to Terrania felt like a trivial detail. Crossing the Gobi on the Bullets had been a type of uncertainty she was familiar with. Her relationship with Julian, on the other hand, was a venture into unknown territory that sometimes made her so afraid that she pushed him away in pure self-defense.

"There should have been no more left of Ernst Ellert than a pile of ashes," said Timothy, returning to the subject of the man lying before them. "No one knows how Arkonide energy shields work, even if KaHe keeps saying things like 'fifth-dimensional' and 'precision adjustment of the field oscillation,' but what's certain is that touching it is deadly. Or should be."

Silence returned, all three of them lost in thought.

This ended abruptly when Timothy's tablet rang like an antiquated mechanical alarm clock. He fished it out of his pocket. The screen pulsed red and he swiped it to stop the alarm. Then he took the backpack he had leaned against the bed.

"I have to get going. My night shift is about to start. A meeting of the developers of TerraNet's real-time translation feature. It's been a pleasure meeting you..."

"Mildred Orsons," she hastily offered. "And this is Julian. Julian Tifflor..."

"Also known as 'Tiff' to his friends," said Julian, completing the sentence.

"New in Terrania?"

Julian looked at his pod. "We've been here for three hours and fifty-four minutes. Does that still count as new?"

"I'd say so, yeah." Timothy laughed. "Do you have a place to sleep already?"

"Yes, but we haven't been there yet."

"Work? An assignment?"

Julian shook his head. "We were going to take care of that tomorrow."

"Any sense of how things work in Terrania?"

Mildred and Julian exchanged glances. "Well, someone called

Julio gave us a—”

“Julio! You’re lucky he didn’t instantly wire you up and assimilate you into the cyborg community he’s always waxing lyrical about!” Timothy raised a hand and held it in front of his head. Like a data visor—or a suggestion that Julio was somewhat blind to the real world. “If you want, you can come with me. I sleep three buildings away.”

“Gladly!” said Mildred without hesitation. This gangly man with a long braid and excessively baggy pants was something special. She sensed it.

“Then come on!” Timothy Harnahan shouldered his backpack and walked to the stairs. On the lowest step, he stopped and turned to the man in the bed. “Oh, and Ernst, don’t cause any trouble while we’re gone, okay?”

7.

July 25, 2036
John Marshall

What am I even doing here?

That question echoed in John Marshall's thoughts as Thora brought the helicopter in for a landing not far from Fort Sunrise. The base was abandoned; a fire had reduced the buildings to charred foundations and twisted steel frames.

A month ago, Marshall had been a former investment banker with far more heart than brains, as his ex-banker friends had put it. A lunatic who had poured his bonuses into a private orphanage in Houston instead of investing them to turn his millions into further millions.

The drone escort led them to an area marked by a ring of army vehicles, circled above it several times, then flew off into the air. He was relieved; the autonomous combat machines had scared him.

Thora held the helicopter over the landing site. The dark, moist earth had been compressed into a solid surface by tank treads. An all-terrain vehicle veered away from the endless stream of supply vehicles and raced to the landing site. This had to belong to General de Soto. The man Rhodan had to deceive—a feat he would only manage with Marshall's help.

Thora softly touched down. The turbines' roar slowed into a fading *flap flap* of the rotors.

The ATV reached the landing point. The driver braked hard, sending mud flying. A man got out. He was brawny, with the sun glistening on his bald dome. General Joshua de Soto.

Marshall didn't like him.

"Ready?" Mercant asked, looking around at everyone. Without waiting for any replies, he went to the helicopter door, opened it, and unfolded the steps.

"Are the masks fitting properly?" Rhodan asked.

Mercant stood in front of Rhodan. He got a good look at the

face that was strange to Marshall, yet familiar at the same time. Marshall had seen countless pictures and videos of Stanley Drummond online. Rhodan's new face matched his down to the last detail. Marshall found it disconcerting. Drummond was a man who had been made bitter and distrustful by life. Deep lines had engraved themselves on the president's face. It didn't suit Rhodan at all.

"You look magnificent, Mr. President," said Mercant once he had finished his check. Then he stood in front of Thora and scrutinized her face. Two deep furrows between her eyebrows lent her a sternness that Marshall couldn't help but find intimidating. They suited the Arkonide. They also suited the role she had to play.

"You too, Chief of Staff Tansley," Mercant said. For Marshall, Mercant only spared a brief glance. Marshall wasn't on Homeland Security's list of most wanted terrorists. All they'd needed to do was dye his hair black and adjust his sideburns.

"Then let's go!" Rhodan straightened up and got out of the helicopter. Thora followed him. Marshall hesitated.

"You okay, John?" Sid had stopped next to him.

He nodded. "I just need a moment."

"You can do this." The boy, who was practically a son to him, took his hand and squeezed it tight. "I know you can. And if it gets dicey, I'll pull you out." He gave Marshall a wink.

Marshall looked at him in astonishment. Sid was taking *his* hand? A month ago, the boy had still been so shy that he couldn't even look people in the eye while talking to them. The telepath thanked him and looked around for Anne Sloane. She had stayed where she was. When she noticed his gaze, she turned her head away.

It was no use. Marshall walked to the door. Rhodan, followed by Thora, crossed the landing site at a stately pace befitting the US president.

Marshall had watched Rhodan once before. After Sid had pleaded hard enough, the two of them had come to Nevada Fields to watch the *Stardust*'s launch. From the spectator stands, he'd seen Rhodan and his crewmates march to the launch tower in their space suits. He'd asked himself, *Why are people of this caliber wasting their time with an obviously meaningless endeavor like space flight?* It had been inconceivable to him.

But in the last few weeks, he'd learned the answer. Space was

real, and space flight was no meaningless endeavor. The Arkonides proved that. Humanity was neither alone nor unique in the universe. Humans had to either face up to this realization or perish. John Marshall, the ordinary human with a gift that was anything but ordinary, had to face up to it.

He pulled himself together, carefully descended the steps, and came to a halt, closing his eyes and directing his attention inwards. He forgot the damp air that smelled of swamp mixed with the exhaust fumes of dozens of idling diesel motors. He forgot the burning summer sun on his exposed skin. He forgot the weapon barrels aimed at Marine One, at his friends, at him. He forgot the burning pain flaring up in his calf—the memory of being shot, which had marked the end of his old existence a month prior.

He opened his eyes again and located Joshua de Soto. The tall and burly general reminded Marshall of a bull. He stood at the edge of the landing site, legs spread wide, and awaited the new arrivals. His arms were folded in a challenging pose. Not the way an officer was supposed to greet his supreme commander.

Marshall extended the feelers of his gift, reaching into de Soto's mindscape. He grew hot. Stanley Drummond and Joshua de Soto were buddies, that much was clear. But how close were they? What did de Soto know about Drummond? What did Rhodan have to know about de Soto to play his role?

Marshall merged into de Soto and experienced his life as a highlight reel. *Sheltered childhood on a farm in southern Georgia. Boredom. Youth. Hanging out with friends. Endless conversations about girls and how to get them. Drinking, pills, illegal street races. Living life as if he were invincible. A life without meaning. Then came 9/11. The Twin Towers collapsing in fountains of smoke and debris. Meaning found. The army. Afghanistan, then Iraq. Heat, thirst. The fear. The first life he took. The next. Comrades who died. Comrades...*

Drummond. Where was Drummond?

Comrades who died. Then: Jungle. Colombia. The war against the narcos. And at last: Drummond. Young, idealistic. An ambush. De Soto and Drummond survive, the only ones from their platoon. Hostages. Ransom money that never materialized. Torture. The narcos are bored. Violence, hunger, thirst, waterboarding. De Soto and Drummond cling to one another. Until they are freed...

Panting, Marshall whispered what he saw. What he felt. Rhodan and Thora listened to his words over the com.

Freedom. Drummond leaves the army, moves to Homeland Security. De Soto stays put. The army is his life. He can't imagine any other. The tie, the friendship remains. Drummond quickly rises through the ranks, becoming a cabinet member, then the president. De Soto rises slowly, refusing promotions. He assumes his friend Drummond is behind them. He…

De Soto started moving and came over to the newcomers. "Stan, what the hell are you doing here?" He spread his arms wide and brought Rhodan in for a tight hug. "I thought you were in LA giving those terrorists what they deserve!"

Rhodan pulled himself free. "I am." His hoarse voice resembled the president's. "You can watch it online."

"I know. So how can you be here at the same time?"

"What else are doubles good for?"

"Stan, Stan, Stan. Always with a trick up your sleeve." De Soto shook his head, approvingly and reproachfully. "So, why have you shown up here unannounced? In that old thing? All on its own? My men almost blew you right out of the sky, and I wouldn't have blamed them for it."

Marine One never flew unaccompanied. Mercant had explained it to them. Four other identical helicopters always accompanied it so that would-be attackers didn't know where to aim. But modifying more than one helicopter had been beyond their means.

"Unconventional times call for unconventional measures," said Rhodan. "The Marine Corps had this Hawk in reserve—and one copter draws less attention than half a dozen."

Then why did you come in Marine One and not just in any old aircraft? Marshall read in de Soto's thoughts, but the general didn't say it aloud. Another question was more important to him. "Got it. And who are these two? I've never seen their faces before. What happened to O'Brian?"

O'Brian, the president's right-hand man. *A mutual friend*, Marshall read. His absence raised the general's suspicions. He also didn't appreciate Marshall's presence, or Thora's. Marshall whispered as much to Rhodan.

"O'Brian is in Los Angeles, leading the operations there. This is Janine Tansley and Joe Markham. My new interim chief of staff and my new bodyguard."

De Soto narrowed his eyes and sized up Marshall and Thora. "Save the fairy tales for your New Year's speeches, Stan. Who are

these two? And why does that sweaty guy keep muttering to himself?" He focused on Marshall. The telepath forced himself not to look away.

"It was worth a try." Rhodan gave a boyish smirk. "They're some of Monterny's."

"That's what I thought. What can they do?"

"All kinds of things. Joe's what we call a 'wave rider.' He can use the power of his mind to tap into communication channels, and see and hear the transmissions."

De Soto snorted. "So can any pod!"

"Yeah, but even the best pod can't produce a full analysis in real time like Joe can."

"Is that why he's constantly muttering?"

Marshall felt as though the general's gaze was piercing him.

"Yes."

"And the girl?"

"Janine's a tech feeler. She can sense how machines tick. Just what your team is in need of."

De Soto folded his arms again. "Sounds like *X-Men Part 17* or some other sci-fi bullshit!"

"True. Same as the Arkonides, but we're still stuck with them. Not for much longer, though." Rhodan looked towards the tarpaulin. "Give me an update, Joshua! What's the situation with the ship?"

"We're on it."

"Is it still airworthy?"

"Maybe. Better if you see for yourself. That's why you came here, right?" With a hand gesture, the general told the soldiers to stay on the landing site, then started walking. Alone. Had Rhodan allayed his suspicions? Marshall concentrated, trying to pick up the general's thoughts. He filtered through the thousand pressing tasks that came with command.

There was a temporary path made out of planks. It was just wide enough for the general and the man he thought was the president. Marshall and Thora kept two paces behind.

"We're not as far along as I'd like," said de Soto.

"That much is clear to me, Joshua. Why do you think I relieved Harrison of duty?"

"I know. And if I don't produce results, and quick, you'll do the same to me. I know you, Stan."

The heat grew unbearable. Marshall loosened the knot of his tie, trying to give himself some room to breathe. He was sweating all over. The thirst! What he wouldn't have given for something to drink! He closed his eyes for a moment, then fixed his gaze on the general's tattooed bull neck. He managed to delve into de Soto's thoughts again...

A boy on a swing. The same boy as a young man. A diploma in his hand. The same young man in a marine uniform. Philip. De Soto's son. In Los Angeles at this very moment. Wounded. The general got the news a few minutes ago...

Marshall whispered it to Rhodan. A detail that might prove important. The opportunity for a gesture.

"Harrison wasted a lot of time rallying troops." The general made a dismissive hand motion. "Pointlessly. If the Chinese, or the Russians, or the Brazilians, or anyone else start acting up, they have a long road ahead of them. We'd stop them well before they reached these godforsaken mountains. I doubt they have the resources anyway. Right now, there's no nation on Earth that doesn't need every armed soldier just to keep order inside their own borders."

De Soto stopped to allow Rhodan to go ahead over a provisional footbridge crossing a branch of the river. Churned up earth had colored the water a dirty brown.

"And when it comes to Rhodan and his band of traitors, everything conventional troops have to offer is totally ineffective. The Chinese learned that in the Gobi, and they've paid for it with a civil war. If we want to guard ourselves against these crazies, there's only one thing that'll do it, and that's this right here!"

The general came to a halt. The round tent tarpaulin was only a few steps away, at approximately eye level. A waist-high, provisional fence bordered the tarpaulin's edge. Marshall looked between the two men and saw what the tarpaulin was hiding: a huge hole in the ground. It reminded him of a photo of an illegal diamond mine in Brazil that he'd seen once. A steep funnel leading deep underground, dug by countless people, akin to ants, in a search for Earth's treasures.

In *this* pit, there was only one treasure: the Arkonide ship in which Thora had flown here from Venus to rescue her foster father, Crest da Zoltral. A steel sphere with a diameter of roughly sixty meters. Its equatorial bulge housed its spacedrives. The ship was

sitting at an angle, like a ball a child had casually left lying around after finishing playing with it. A blackened, burned-out ball.

"Why is the ship so deep in the ground?" Rhodan asked. He gave no sign of his true reaction to the sight. For Drummond, the ship was only a tool. One of many. "The impact?"

"Partly. The ground here is soft, and the experts estimate this thing's weight as several hundred tonnes, maybe even thousands. Plummeting from a height of 250 meters, that's an immense amount of force. It's a minor miracle the ship didn't fall apart." De Soto pointed to the bottom of the pit. Soldiers covered from head to toe in mud were holding a hose with a thick grey mass spurting out of it. "Cement," the general explained. "We've been attempting to stabilize the pit walls and the ground under the ship. We have the walls under control by now, but subterranean water veins are pulling the ground away from under our feet. The ship is still sinking by ten centimeters every hour."

"It's not looking good," Rhodan said.

Marshall had to agree with him. The hull was blackened and torn open in many places. Grotesquely contorted steel extended in all directions, like arms seeking help. When explosions inside had brought the ship down, the pressure had needed a way to escape. Marshall wondered where Thora would even begin with it.

"Sad but true. Our experts estimate that this Goratschin triggered explosions equivalent in force to tactical nukes." De Soto stroked his stubble-covered chin. "Crazy. A single guy. He closes his eyes, concentrates—and *boom*, this technical marvel goes up in flames. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't been standing there." He put his hands on his hips. "Has this Goratschin been captured, by the way?"

"No."

"He can't get away. The man's a potential mass murderer. He has to be on our side—or at least not on anyone else's."

"We'll get him, you can be sure of that."

Steep steps dug into the funnel walls led down into the pit. Marshall found it hard to keep his balance. His knees trembled. The gunshot wound in his lower leg gave him a stabbing pain every time he set his foot down.

"Looks like a pile of scrap metal, right?" said de Soto as they took a break on a flat series of planks. The ship's rim bulge came so close to them that they could almost have reached out and touched

it. To their left, a segment measuring several meters across was missing from the bulge. A propulsion unit must have exploded there.

"But allow me to reassure you, Stan," the general continued, "it doesn't look so bad from the inside. There's an emergency power supply. Its basis is still unclear. The specialists are certain that neither of the two fusion reactors is operational, at least."

Another staircase led them deeper. Marshall took each step one at a time. To his surprise, Thora hung back. Silently, she offered him her hand. Marshall took it and leaned on the Arkonide for support. Another footbridge awaited them—anchored to the wall and the inside of the ship. It passed through an irregular hole, its edges formed from blackened and bent metal. Marshall estimated the opening's diameter as around three meters.

They stepped inside. The room they entered was surprisingly large, more like a hall. It was brightly lit without any visible light source.

"We believe this is a hangar," said de Soto. "However, we haven't found any auxiliary craft, escape capsules, or similar. We assume they existed originally, though."

"What happened to them?" Rhodan asked.

"On that topic, we can only speculate. We can't even be sure of where this ship came from. It's like it shouldn't exist. It isn't from the Arkonide ship we destroyed on the Moon. We..."

Marshall grew dizzy. The ground beneath him seemed to slip away; he struggled to keep his balance. No one noticed. De Soto was preoccupied with his speech, Rhodan with his role as listener, and Thora, the Arkonide, seemed suddenly absent, overcome with emotion.

Fresh air. He needed fresh air. Marshall went back to the bridge and breathed deeply. It was cooler outside. The base of the funnel was too deep for the sun's rays to reach. The tarpaulin helped as well. He looked up. He could only see a narrow, crescent-shaped strip of the midday sky.

The air shimmered. He knew that sight. He'd seen it before. In the Gobi. The Arkonide energy shield had produced that effect. That meant...

He concentrated on the general's thoughts, whirled around, and ran into the hangar.

He arrived too late. The general had drawn his pistol. Its barrel

was aimed at Rhodan.

"Play time's over. You're not Stan."

Rhodan kept his cool. "What the hell are you talking about, Joshua? It's me, your old buddy. I've known you since Colombia. Who else am I supposed to be?"

"You did good research. But not good enough. The change of commander surprised you. You were expecting Harrison. How can that be, I wonder? Stan assigned me here personally."

"I did," Rhodan affirmed. "Just because one staff member wasn't up to date—"

"Enough. O'Brian just got in contact. He isn't in Los Angeles, and he knows nothing about any double. Mysterious, wouldn't you say?" De Soto whispered something into his com transmitter. Marshall didn't have to read his thoughts to know that he was calling reinforcements to the ship.

And they were waiting on a silver platter. The shield made escape impossible—and kept out Sid and Anne, their rescuers.

"Who are you?" the general asked. "Rhodan sent you, didn't he?"

Rhodan shook his head. "Joshua, I beg you. We—"

Rhodan broke off mid-sentence when a figure hurtled towards the general. It was Thora. She was stretched out completely, like an arrow. Her shoes rammed into de Soto's face. Without a sound, he fell to the floor, unconscious. Thora landed with a fluid motion that would have made a cat jealous. She took the weapon from de Soto's limp fingers and threw it disdainfully to the side.

"What was that?" Rhodan asked.

Thora pulled a face. "We call it 'Dagor.' Maybe I'll tell you more about it when there's time. Right now, we have to get out of here!"

The sound of boots clanging on steel drew nearer—the reinforcements de Soto had ordered.

"Quickly!" Thora cried. She ran towards a wall, and in the last moment before she hit it, an opening appeared.

Marshall stood there, stunned, not believing his eyes. Then Rhodan grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him along and through the opening. The hole closed again, and a moment later, a hail of bullets clamored against the wall.

8.

July 26, 2036
Crest da Zoltral

"You have a nice view," said Tatiana Michalovna when they entered the room.

"It comes with the height," Crest answered noncommittally.

He had asked the human woman to accompany him to his apartment in the Stardust Tower. Reginald Bull had reacted with a disapproving frown, but the Arkonide sensed that he had nothing to fear from her. At least, nothing on the level the impulsive Bull suspected.

"My room doesn't have a view at all." Michalovna turned to Crest. "They assigned me to a basement on the edge of town."

"The supply situation isn't easy. It will improve."

"For sure." She indicated the entire building with an encompassing hand motion. "They say you designed this tower, Crest?"

The human hadn't sought him out purely to exchange pleasantries, of that much he was certain. But Crest decided to wait and see. Arkonides and humans had similar norms in this area.

"That's an exaggeration. I ordered the robots to build it, that's all. The idea came from Lesly Pounder. He was inspired by the Nevada Fields control tower. He must have found it difficult to part from it."

"It's no ordinary building."

"That was never the intent. The *Stardust* was a symbol for many people. We needed a new one for Terrania."

Tatiana Michalovna stepped out onto the balcony. The cool of morning still lay over the city, but the sun's rays already burned against the skin. Crest stayed in the shade.

"How tall will it be in the end?" The woman leaned far over the railing and craned her head upwards. She seemed to have no fear of heights.

Crest did. He hurried to follow her, stepping close enough that he could grab her if she lost her balance. “As tall as is necessary,” he said, holding out an inviting hand to her.

She ignored it and leaned out even farther. “Is this how they build back home on Arkon?”

What was wrong with this woman? The Arkonide waited for his inner voice to speak up and call to him. It was silent, as it had so often been since he had joined the humans. As if his audacity had left it speechless.

“It’s one of many ways,” Crest replied. “Terrania is a tiny glimpse of our possibilities. The only limit for us Arkonides is our imagination.”

A limit that was often so constricting, Crest saw it as a vice, slowly but surely choking him. But he didn’t tell Michalovna that. He would never confide that in a human.

“You don’t like talking about your home, do you?”

“What gives you that idea?”

“I can sense it. I feel the same way. It hurts. It hurts so much that I’ve stood on the precipice more than once. One step, and the pain is gone...”

No wonder she had no fear of heights! “You can’t do that! Life is the most valuable thing in all the universe!”

“Says who?” She turned back again, walked past him into the room, and looked around searchingly. “Do you have something to drink?”

Crest followed her. “Of course.” He took a glass and a dented plastic bottle out of a cupboard. They were adorned with Chinese characters that he couldn’t read. Sometimes he asked himself if English had been the wrong human language to learn. He poured a glassful and held it out for the human woman. “Here you go!”

She burst out laughing as if he’d made a joke. “No, thank you.”

“Why not? It’s drinking water. You said—”

“Forget it. I didn’t mean that kind of water.” She laid a hand on his own, which was holding the glass, and drew it over to the side. “You still have a lot to learn about humans if you want to get by here.” She pulled her hand back again, and Crest set the glass down. “You know,” she continued, “where I come from, there’s always another kind of water. Vodka. We drank it, my friends and I, when we held a tusovka. Do you know what a tusovka is?”

“No.”

“Tusovka is life. Friends. Time together. Drinking. Vodka. A lot of vodka. Tusovka is emotional comfort.”

“Then why didn’t you stay in your homeland?” These humans... Whenever Crest thought he had a grasp on them, he was forced to realize he’d only scratched the surface.

“Because I’m different. I have a special talent, as you know. In many ways it’s a blessing. I’m rarely surprised and have never been taken advantage of. I have no illusions about my fellow countrymen.” She pressed her lips together so firmly, they turned into pale lines. “They lie. All people lie. But especially in Russia. ‘Great Russia’! The name alone is a lie. A land where no one thinks about anything except when they can next have vodka, while its population dies out because no one has the courage to bring children into the world anymore.”

“That doesn’t sound like a place you’d mourn having left, Miss Michalovna,” Crest said softly.

“You’re right. I tell myself that every day, every hour. But it’s no use. It’s my home. I despise it. I love it. Do you know that feeling?”

Yes, all too well! Crest thought. He didn’t say it aloud.

“So when Clifford Monterny tracked me down, I left. Clifford pulled me out of there and made me into what I am today.”

And he’d kidnapped Crest, taken him hostage, and come perilously close to taking his life—with Tatiana Michalovna’s help. The Arkonide drew back a step.

“You see Clifford as a criminal, right? An evil human?” She looked at him, unwavering. “I’ll let you in on a secret: there are no evil humans. I should know, shouldn’t I? There are only humans. Humans who believe they’re doing the right thing. And sometimes do evil in the process. Indescribable evil. But Clifford wasn’t evil!”

She advanced towards him. He could feel her breath. It smelled bad. The smell was familiar to Crest; he had experienced it from other people before. Did vodka stink like this?

She reached out, grabbed his wrists, and clasped them firmly. The can slipped out of his fingers and fell to the floor with a clatter.

“You’re hurting me!” he cried, trying to free himself. But she was too strong.

“Everyone here believes Clifford was evil. And because I was with him, they believe that I’m evil too. But I’m not! I don’t want to be here! I just want to go back home!” She looked at him, almost

pleading. Then she said quietly, “But I can never go back. No one wants me there anymore. They’d lock me up. Just like they would with you, Crest. Isn’t that right?”

The Arkonide’s heart lurched. His cheeks burned as a traitorous red flush shot across his face. “Let me go!” He thrashed about, even though he knew he would never win against this woman. She was young, strong, and determined.

To his surprise, she released him and took a step back. She staggered, as if it were a challenge to maintain her balance. Beads of sweat appeared on her face.

“Why don’t you admit it? It’s obvious. Everyone with even a shred of sense in their head figured it out ages ago. You and your fellow Arkonides arrived on the Moon in a gigantic starship and got stranded there. You were there for weeks, possibly even months. And you never called for help? No one in your Grand Imperium thought it necessary to follow up on what happened to their ship? And above all, why would a dying man like you leave his home behind, and with it the medical treatment keeping him alive, and set out on an expedition to a world populated by barbarians? Why?”

Each of her questions struck Crest like a blow. He shrank back, leaning against the wall with his shoulders. His skull began to pound. Ever faster and harder, until he... He understood. The telepath was invading his mind with her psychic ability!

“Stop it!” He pushed himself away from the wall. “Stop rummaging around in my thoughts at once!”

Her eyes widened. She hadn’t reckoned with such vehement resistance.

“Get out!” Crest screamed. “Before I call for help!”

“No.” Her pupils narrowed again. “I won’t. Not before I’ve spoken to you.”

“You’ve been speaking to me all this time! What do you want from me?”

“For you to let me share in it.”

“Share in what? I don’t know what you’re talking about! My thoughts belong to me. Your gift doesn’t work on me. You can’t read my thoughts!”

“Not now. Maybe never again. But it did work for me once. When Clifford was speaking to you.”

“When he was interrogating me, you mean!” he corrected.

She ignored this. “I concentrated entirely on you, Crest. And I found out why you came to us humans. You’re searching for eternal life!”

“You... I...” He could manage no more than fragments. No one knew his secret. No one but he and Thora, and loyal Charron, who had stayed behind on Arkon. No one!

“The planet of eternal life. That’s why you turned your back on Arkon. A deathly ill man, unwanted on his home planet, who puts everything on the line to gain a new life. A life free of illness. Immortality.” She walked toward him again. Slowly, almost reverently. “You are a courageous man, Crest.”

He retreated until he’d reached the corner with nowhere left to go.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me,” the human whispered. “I don’t mean you any harm. Your secret is safe with me. No one else will know.”

She breathed deeply. Crest smelled her stinking breath again. He turned his head to the side.

“No one else will know,” she repeated. “You just have to promise me one thing: if you find eternal life, let me share in it! Will you do that?”

Crest kept his head turned to the side and avoided looking at her. She knew! Lying was pointless; she had read the truth in his thoughts. It was too far-fetched for her to have guessed it. A memory came back to him: Monterny threatening him in Fort Sunrise. Michalovna had been there; she had listened in to everything. Crest had only distantly grasped what the humans wanted from him. Exhaustion and lack of sleep had left him in their clutches.

Now Michalovna had him in her clutches. She could reveal his secret at any time. She...

“Get away from Crest!” a voice bellowed. “Right now!”

It belonged to Reginald Bull. The former astronaut had entered the room unnoticed, accompanied by three Chinese soldiers. Their assault rifles were aimed squarely at the Russian.

The woman turned around, raising her hands maddeningly slowly. “What do you want with me? We were just talking!”

Bull paid her no attention. His face was red; the pale scar scars stood out. “You’ll have to excuse the intrusion, Crest. But we had no other choice.”

“I… I wasn’t in danger,” he managed. She knew! What was he going to do?

“I hope so.” Bull was quaking with anger. “But I’m not here because I’m afraid this woman might do something to you. We have to make sure she doesn’t get away.”

“How come? I don’t see any reason why—”

“Rico’s body has disappeared,” Bull interrupted. “And I swear to God, I’ll take up American citizenship again and apologize personally to President Drummond if Miss Michalovna can’t tell us what’s happened to Rico!”

9.

July 26, 2036
Julian Tifflor

Julian was awoken by the first rays of the morning sun tickling his face.

Mildred, who distanced herself from him at night because she couldn't sleep otherwise, only to cling to him in the early hours while in deep sleep, began to stir. She yawned and snuggled up to him all over again. Her grip on him was tight.

Timothy Harnahan was already awake. He was sitting in the sunlight, cross-legged on the floor. The tablet was in his lap; it never seemed to leave his hands. He murmured foreign syllables as if meditating. Maybe he *was* meditating. But primarily, he was learning the Arkonide language. A language that was stubbornly trying to elude him.

Julian had no doubt that Timothy would master it. In his high school years, Julian (the sportsman and lady-killer) would have had more than one biting remark for the gangly, boyishly faced man, but there was an inner strength in him that impressed Julian.

"Good morning!" Julian said. He pulled himself out of Mildred's arms and sat up.

"Morning!" Timothy replied without turning his head. "Five minutes, okay?"

"Sure."

Timothy continued to murmur his Arkonide vocabulary. Julian leaned over Mildred. He shook her, whispering softly into her ear. For a while, nothing happened, then she sat up with a start. She jerked away from him as if she'd accidentally been hugging a stranger. Her eyes widened. Rage flashed in them. At herself, for giving Julian a glimpse of her inner thoughts. At Julian, who had seen that version of her.

Then it was over, and she said casually, "Morning already?"

Julian nodded. Without a word, Mildred got up from the self-

inflating Chinese army field mat serving as their bed and got dressed.

Watching her, Julian wondered why he was so drawn to her. She was beautiful, in her own way. Not like the high school queens and cheerleaders he had chased in his teenage years. Those girls had been works of art on two legs. Meticulously arranged beauties who had spent endless amounts of time in the bathroom each morning. Mildred Orsons spent less time there than it took him to get dressed. Teeth brushed, a splash of water on her face, deodorant under her arms—Mildred's typical schedule had no more than that on it. Nor was any more needed. She always cut a good figure. Whatever she wore. Whatever she did.

And that, Julian recognized, was what separated her from all the other women and girls he'd been involved with before. With the others, he could go to the drive-in, fool around in the back seat, dance at a club until dawn. Not bad at first, but not enough for him. With Mildred, he could do literally anything—up to and including crossing the Gobi Desert on decommissioned former Indian military motorcycles to seek out the gateway to the stars in a city only a few days old.

His father would have liked Mildred. He...

"Well? Finished marveling?" It hadn't escaped Mildred's notice that he was watching her. She turned to him, both hands on her hips. Pretending to be angry but actually flattered by his attention.

Julian ostentatiously looked her up and down. Then he put on his sleaziest, most suggestive grin and said, "I don't know. Is this all I get?"

"Nah. You get this too!"

He saw a shadow flying towards him. A moment later, his balled-up T-shirt hit him square in the face.

"Well, Mr. Space Cadet? Are we ready to set out for the stars?"

Timothy, Julian, and Mildred were helping out at a supply stand in the city's inner district. More accurately, they *were* the supply stand. The rest of the crew never showed up. As Timothy found out via TerraNet, they were lying in Terrania's hospital with gastrointestinal complications.

"The usual," said Timothy as he stowed the tablet away in the thigh pocket of his cargo pants. "People come here from all over—and bring their germs with them."

They put up the stand together. It didn't take long. Three folding tables, three folding chairs. They arranged them in a triangle in the middle of the square. "Optimal for the onslaught," said Timothy.

What onslaught? Julian wanted to ask. The streets were empty. But right at that moment, a truck stopped in front of the stand. One from Chinese army stocks, of course. The national flags on its body had been painted over with a new insignia: a human hand and alien claw in a handshake over a starry sky backdrop.

Along with the driver—an old, fat Asian man who reminded Julian of a Buddha statue, but who could carry twice as much as Julian himself—they unloaded the cargo: plastic water bottles and containers full of cans.

"Is that everything?" Mildred asked once the truck had driven off and she was setting about sticking up the supplies into the middle of their triangle. "Water and dog food?"

"Human food." Timothy took a can out of a container, then threw it into the air and caught it again like a ball. "One-man rations from the Chinese army. You get the choice of rice with vegetables or vegetables with rice." He winked at her. "We have a few million of them." He put the can down again. "But the water..." He pulled out his tablet and swiped across the screen. "No mistake, sadly. The water rations have been reduced. Two liters per person."

"That's not much. Not in this heat."

"Yeah, but we don't have enough for more. Water was already limited during the siege. The blast wave from the atom bomb cost us a few tankers, and no resupplies are getting through. And our own supply isn't going all that smoothly."

"Our own supply?"

"Currently from the Juyan salt lake. General Bai Jun arranged for a desalination facility to be set up there. By the end of the siege, it was almost complete. Emphasis on 'almost.' The drilling for water veins sadly hasn't been successful yet." He went over to a bottle and unscrewed the cap. "Want a sip?"

Julian formed his hands into a bowl and held them under the bottle. Timothy filled them and Julian drank...and had to force himself not to spit it straight out again.

"The taste of the Gobi. It's unique. But don't worry, you get used to it." Timothy looked up. "The night shift is coming! It's kicking off!"

The volunteers arrived from the outer city's building sites. They were dirty. The dust of the Gobi had gotten through their clothes, mixing with their sweat to form an oily gray layer covering their skin. Only the eyes, covered by protective goggles, had remained clean. They were very tired eyes, but also eyes filled with pride at being part of a great work.

The volunteers waited patiently, forming three equally long lines. The task proceeded at a good pace. Food and water were free, even if a few of the volunteers paid with solar bills for fun. Timothy, Julian, and Mildred played along and repurposed an empty box as a cash register.

The news that the water rations had been reduced was accepted by the volunteers without any fuss. With one exception.

"Two liters? Yesterday it was still four!" Julian heard behind his back. A man's voice. Cuttingly sharp and with a deep, rolled "r" that left no doubt that English wasn't his mother tongue.

"I'm sorry," he heard Timothy reply, "but that's all there is. We're having problems with the desalination facility and the sources."

"But I'm thirsty! It's hot here! Horrendously hot!"

Julian turned his head to look at the man. He was thin and wiry, perhaps in his early to mid thirties. He wore a uniform with no rank insignia. But it wasn't Chinese; the cut was different. It was clean. The man hadn't come from one of the building sites. He had to be involved with administration.

"It's hot for us all, buddy," said Timothy.

"But I... We..." The man stopped short, struggling for words, as if he couldn't believe his ears. As if he was used to always getting what he wanted.

"Come back again this evening," Timothy added in an effort to console him. "Maybe by then the desalination facility will be fully operational again and we'll have a second ration for you."

"But that's not acceptable!"

"It's all I can do. Sorry. But if you want, you can have two food rations. We have plenty of those."

The gears visibly turned in the man's head. He opened his mouth, closed it again, grabbed a bottle and two cans, and strutted off, stiff as a board.

Timothy, Julian, and Mildred watched him go. "If you ask me, he's making a beeline for the next supply stand to get water there,"

said Mildred.

Shrugging, Timothy said, “He can try. By the time he gets there, they’ll be all out of water already.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. There should be an allocation system so no one can take liberties.”

“What for?” Timothy replied. “There’ll be a handful of cheats like him, maybe. With an allocation system, it would all be more complicated for everyone, and a few dozen people would have to oversee it—instead of doing more meaningful work. Like we are!”

They turned their attention to the ones waiting in line again. Julian spoke to them using TerraNet’s simultaneous translation function. It was a strange feeling to say something in English and receive a response in an unknown language, but one he quickly got used to.

Gradually, the lines got shorter until they’d supplied all the volunteers from the night shift. Finally, Timothy clapped his hands in satisfaction and sat down on a container of cans to hunch over his tablet. It looked like Timothy spent every free minute on it.

“Brushing up on your Arkonide again?” Julian asked.

“Nope. I’ll do that again when I visit Ernst tonight.” He held the tablet up for Julian and Mildred to see. The screen showed bar graphs and clusters of dots on a black backdrop, reminiscent of stars.

“What’s that?”

“Data sets from the radio telescope in Arecibo. More specifically, evaluations. I reserved computing time in the cloud from TerraNet to run my own analysis program.”

“Arecibo?” Mildred repeated. “Aren’t they looking for aliens?”

“For decades. And since the advent of the internet, it’s been possible to join in. I grew up with SETI@home. At some point I had the idea to go one better. It felt like the obvious next step.”

Mildred winked at Timothy. “Obviously. What else can you do in Kansas except search for aliens?”

“You know. Drive a tractor, get wasted on the weekend...”

“But that wasn’t enough for you?”

“As you can see.”

“What do you when you’re not brushing up on your Arkonide, watching over seemingly dead people, giving out rations, or searching for aliens?”

“What indeed?” Timothy reciprocated her wink. “I write stories.

Oral history. I let people tell me about their lives, then I edit it together and post it online."

"Can you live off that?"

"Eat, at least. And the rest figures itself out. What about you two?"

"I'm supposed to become a lawyer," Julian replied.

"That means money."

"Hazard pay, if you ask me. I don't want to spend my life at a desk. I want to journey to the stars!"

Mildred put a hand on Julian's shoulders. "Tiff's a little cuckoo, you know?"

"Then he's in the right place. What about you, Mildred? What are you looking for?"

Mildred's grip suddenly grew harder. Timothy had hit a sore spot. "Honestly, I don't know. I only know that there has to be more than always worrying about whether I'll find a job after college, then being afraid of losing it and not being able to pay the bills for the house and car anymore. Working myself to death."

"Makes sense."

Timothy put the tablet away as new lines formed in front of the stand. Volunteers on the way to the morning shift at the building sites or the inner-city planning teams wanted their rations.

Julian immersed himself in the job. Terrania was different from what he had imagined. He'd pictured a city full of marvelous technology, with its people busy doing nothing but using Arkonide knowledge to prepare for humanity's leap into space.

The real Terrania was a place of scarcity and improvisation. A place where people dug into the desert with spades until their hands bled. A place where people survived on a bottle of water and canned food.

But that didn't bother him anymore. What mattered wasn't Terrania the way it was now. What mattered was the promise it stood for. And that promise was overpowering. He thought of the Stardust Tower, which rose higher into the sky every day. Of Ernst Ellert, who lay in a mystifying coma. Of Timothy, the farm boy from Kansas who sat by Ellert's bedside, brushing up on his Arkonide and searching for aliens at the same time.

He, Julian Tifflor, belonged in this place. He was helping to make the promise of Terrania into a reality.

"Hey!" he heard Mildred cry. "You again!"

Julian whipped around and saw a man by his girlfriend's table. Dusty, his face smeared with dirt. A volunteer from one of the building sites, it looked like. A straggler from the night shift. He carried a large backpack. The material bulged strangely. Julian was pretty sure he could see the contours of an upper arm and a shoulder. *What the...*

"You got yours already!" cried Mildred, trying to sweep the bottles off the table before he could grab them.

The man was faster. He snatched up three bottles, then turned and ran. As his backpack jumped up and down in time to his steps, the material ripped. A shiny, irregular edge appeared. It glistened metallically.

"Stop!" Julian called. "Stop right there!"

With a long leap, he went to give chase. He jumped over the table—and got stuck, the tips of his feet catching on the table's edge. The force tipped the table over. His shoe came off, but it was too late to stop himself. He fell flat onto the ground.

Hands helped him up and tried to hold him back.

"Let it go," said Mildred. "He took three bottles of water, that's all."

Julian leaned on her. His left knee was throbbing. He looked down. His pants were ripped, his knee bleeding.

"It's not about the water!" he wheezed. "In his backpack. He's stolen Arkonide technology! We have to catch him!"

Julian started running. He didn't know if Mildred or Timothy were following him. All he knew was that he had to catch up with this man. And he would! Julian had been a runner in his youth. And he didn't have to carry a heavy backpack. Meter by meter, he closed the gap, and the man turned his head ever more frequently to confirm that his pursuer hadn't given up.

The stranger reached the edge of the inner city. Dust whirled up as he ran alongside the foundation pits towards the desert. Out there, he couldn't escape. In the city, the thief could have hidden himself away, but on the exposed plain, Julian would reach him sooner or later.

Sooner, most likely.

The man grew slower, his energy flagging. Only a hundred meters separated Julian from the thief, when suddenly, an all-terrain vehicle overtook him and stopped next to the man, stirring up a cloud of dust. Another fellow sat at the wheel, with a petite

Asian woman in the passenger seat. The thief slipped off the backpack, heaved it onto the cargo bed, and jumped on after it. The second he landed in the bed, the driver stepped on the gas.

Julian was left coughing in the dust, his hands balled up in rage. He heard footsteps. Mildred caught up with him, followed by Timothy.

"Damn!" she said. "They're up and away!"

Julian shook his head. "Not yet." He tapped the headset and said, "Julio? Do you read me?"

10.

July 25, 2036
Thora da Zoltral

What am I even doing here?

Thora rested both hands against the variable-structure wall that separated her and her human companions from the hanger. It vibrated in a quick, uneven rhythm. Their assailants were hitting the wall with their projectile weapons.

Her vision had darkened. Dagor was a powerful weapon. It unleashed imagined, extraordinary energy in anyone who had spent painstaking years learning the discipline—but Dagor also *demanded* extraordinary energy. Energy that the body and mind could only provide briefly, and only at a high price.

Thora trembled. She rested her entire body weight against the wall, resting on her forehead. The wall was hard and soft at the same time, and warm like a living being. The feeling had been known to her since childhood. A piece of home, far from her home. Did she even have one anymore?

A month ago, she'd have answered that with a yes, albeit a hesitant one. A month ago, she had been the commander of the *Aetron*. On a research mission whose significance eclipsed anything the Arkonides had ventured to do for centuries. It had been a tough struggle to make the expedition a reality. A battle against equilibrium, comfort, and habit, which had often made her despair. But finally it had been achieved, and she and Crest had left Arkon behind. The home that was the epitome of all that represented a good life...and that had long become a shackle.

But Thora hadn't run away. She'd left Arkon behind on a search for hope. For Arkon, for Crest, whose lifetime was inexorably nearing its end, and finally for herself. They had been searching for eternal life, an oft-mocked legend, and yet one never to be stifled. Crest, her foster father, a scholar the likes of which Arkon had never seen in its long history, believed that this world existed. And

Thora believed in Crest.

And now? The *Aetron* had been destroyed by savages…out of naked fear, because it was something that could not be, and they wouldn't allow that. She and Crest were the only survivors and were now stranded among these savages, the humans. And as hard as Thora tried, she kept reaching the conclusion that Crest himself had been the one to pave the way for this catastrophe. It had been Crest who had made contact with the humans, against all rules and good sense, and made them aware of the *Aetron* in the first place.

Thora had opposed this insanity with all her might. She had been unsuccessful.

She should be despondent, filled with wild rage. She should have long since brought her undignified existence to a dignified end. She hadn't done so. Out of fear of what might come after death? Out of fear that nothing came after death? Because the irony of taking her own life while on a search for eternal life felt more unbearable than her despair?

All these answers were accurate, but they stood in the shadow of a very different feeling, one that she knew dominated above all. A feeling so foreign to Thora that it had taken her days to understand it.

Thora felt satisfaction. She had left her entire life behind. For the first time in her life, she was free.

And if she wasn't careful, she'd be dead soon.

"Thora! Over here, please!"

It was Perry Rhodan. The human who had taken Crest away from her—and given him back. Healed and rejuvenated by years.

Rhodan had bent over John Marshall. The mind-reading human was lying on the floor.

"What's wrong with him?" Thora kneeled down by the unconscious man. Her own momentary weakness was forgotten.

She liked John Marshall. He was a quiet, unassuming man, whom many of his fellow humans saw as crazy because he had thrown away a life of luxury and gifted his wealth to others. But Marshall was not crazy. He had merely set himself free.

"Hyperthermia. Dehydration."

"That's impossible. John drank some water right before got out of the helicopter. I saw him do it." And Thora had been shocked to see him drain an entire bottle in one gulp.

Rhodan rested a hand on Marshall's forehead, then pulled it

straight back again. “He did. But it wasn’t enough.”

“I can’t believe that. Your existence on this planet is a harsh one. Humans can’t be this fragile!”

“Ordinary humans, no. But John is no ordinary human. He was reading the general’s thoughts the entire time and feeding them to me. His gift demands enormous energy. His body can provide that in the short term, but it generates intense heat.”

“Which he tries to dissipate through sweat.”

“Exactly.”

Thora looked at the man lying in front of her and suddenly felt an affinity with him. Wasn’t John Marshall’s gift just like Dagor? For a brief moment, you could go beyond your own capabilities…but it came at a price.

“John needs fluids,” Rhodan said. “Where can we find water here?”

A modest request, but almost impossible to fulfill. The *Tosoma IX* was in the American army’s hands. There were soldiers everywhere just waiting for them to show themselves. They…

Marshall stirred. He groaned and his eyes snapped open. They gleamed, looking larger than usual. Or was that only an optical illusion because his face was so sunken?

“S… Sid! What about Sid? And Anne?”

“They’re safe, John.” Rhodan softly pushed the telepath’s upper body back down to the ground.

“How do you know that? The soldiers…”

“Sid survived a nuclear explosion. The boy knows how to take care of himself. He’ll have teleported away with Anne and Mercant.”

Marshall fell silent and processed what Rhodan had said. Then he whispered roughly, “I’m thirsty!”

“I know. We’ll find water for you, John. Thora’s going to take care of it. Right, Thora?” Rhodan raised his head and looked at Thora with the same gaze that had made her uneasy from the very first moment. As if she were afraid to stand before this man.

Nonsense!

Water. Of course. But it was impossible. First…

She reached for the telepath’s hand, found it, and held on to it. “John?”

“Yes?”

“I have a favor to ask you. Can you cope with the thirst for a

little longer?" She ignored Rhodan, who drew a sharp breath.

"I... I think so," Marshall replied. He trusted her. "Why?"

"Because it would be too dangerous. The American soldiers are waiting for us to show our faces. And ultimately, we're here to take this ship, aren't we?"

"What do you have in mind, Thora?" Rhodan interjected before Marshall could say anything.

"The activated energy shield establishes two things," said Thora, surprised by how effortlessly she withstood Rhodan's gaze. This ship was a piece of home; she knew her stuff here. "Firstly, the ship is in the condition we hoped for. It's at least partly functional. That means the auto-repair routine will take effect. And secondly, the American soldiers have managed to at least partly figure out the ship's controls. For us, that means we need to take control of the ship if we hope to survive."

"How do you plan to do that? De Soto's men clearly have superior numbers."

"Yes. But this isn't their home turf. We're standing on a battleship from the Arkonide fleet. It's designed for maximum autonomy. To operate for months, often years without contact with the mothership or a base."

"Thanks, great to know. And how does that help us?"

Thora ignored Rhodan's sarcasm. He was only returning what she'd given him more than once before. "Experience taught the Imperial fleet a long time ago that its ships are not only subject to attacks from the outside," she continued. "On planetary visits, there's a danger of the ship being stormed or infiltrated. Long missions eventually lead to mutinies. The attackers' obvious goal is the ship's command center. Whoever has the command center has the ship."

"Which is de Soto in our case. How do you plan to chase him and his people out of the command center?" Rhodan had slid a hand under Marshall's head to support it. Marshall had closed his eyes again. Was he still conscious?

"I don't," Thora replied. "That would be futile. We'll ignore de Soto and the command center. Every Arkonide battleship has a second, hidden command center. That one takes precedence."

"Making the regular command center useless?"

"Precisely."

Rhodan slowly nodded. "Where is this emergency command

center?"

"Its location is known only to the ship's commander. I don't know."

"You don't know? Then how..."

"I have my hunches."

"Such as?"

"I don't think it can be far from the regular command center."

"What gives you that idea?"

"The fundamental construction of an Arkonide battleship. It hasn't changed in the last few millennia. Every ship has an inner sphere. There, in the secured middle section, are the command centers, the technical facilities essential to survival, and the crew quarters. Around it is a spherical shell that holds the transition drives. This takes up the majority of the ship's volume. A further, outer shell stretches to the armored hull. That holds the hangars, the defensive shield generators, the weapons, and facilities not essential to survival."

"And we're in that outer shell," Rhodan discerned. "How do we make it to the inner section undetected?"

"I must correct you. We are *on* the outer sphere shell. To the Positronic, the room we are in right now is dead space. The onboard computer doesn't know about it. Which means that conquerors and mutineers don't know about it either."

Rhodan considered a moment. "Let's say we do find the emergency command center. How do we get in?"

He'd hit upon the weak point in her plan. "You forget I was the *Tosoma IX*'s commander. I brought this ship from Venus to Earth. The command center will let me in." It was a hope, nothing more, but Thora didn't want to admit that she wasn't sure of herself. Not in front of the humans. Rico, who had turned out to be a robot in the end, had steered the ship.

"All right, then we'll give it a try!" said Rhodan. He turned to the man lying on the floor. "John, can you stand up?"

"I think so," the telepath said softly.

"John can wait for us here," Thora countered. "As long as we make it to the emergency command center, he's saved." And they'd get there more quickly. Marshall would only slow them down.

"No. What if the soldiers find a way to break through that wall? John would be a goner. We're taking him with us!"

Thora didn't object, even if Rhodan's demand ran counter to

everything she'd been taught at the space academy. Arkon was far away—and she liked this human John Marshall. She wanted him to live.

They made slow progress. John Marshall did his best, but the telepath was exhausted and close to collapsing. On top of that, the path was difficult, occasionally impassible. It led through tight, winding ducts just wide enough to let a human or Arkonide through. In some places, rungs led upwards. It was a secret world inside the world of the ship. A world free of technical equipment whose scattered radiation could have given them away.

"How much farther?" Rhodan asked when they reached a junction where the path split into three.

"A few minutes," Thora lied. She had hope that the emergency command center really was in the area she had suggested. Nothing more. The self-assurance she showed the humans was a sham. She pointed to the middle duct, which rose steeply upwards. "This way!"

Her words were drowned out by metallic clanging. It seemed to come from everywhere, as if hundreds of hammers were pounding against the ship at the same time. The floor vibrated.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Probably the butts of guns," Rhodan replied.

"You mean the soldiers are banging against the ship with their weapons? Why?"

"Psychological warfare. De Soto is holding a battue for us. He's hoping to flush us out."

"A battue? What's that?"

Rhodan explained it to her: a form of hunting where the prey was forced out into the open.

"I don't see the point of such a hunt." The hammer made it tough to concentrate. "Where's the sport in it? The prey has no chance."

"Indeed."

She looked around. "The analogy doesn't fit. We're not prey. The soldiers can't do anything to us here."

"Hopefully," said Rhodan.

They kept going. The duct led to the shell holding the transition drives. A footbridge led across the room, which lay in half-darkness. Its measurements were precisely determined, and yet Thora

couldn't shake off the feeling of an endless distance. Here, the soldiers' hammering seemed to come from farther away.

The bridge ended in another junction. Suddenly, the hammering broke out above them again. It was louder than ever as the soldiers pounded on the adjacent walls.

"Which way?" Rhodan asked. He had been holding John Marshall under the shoulder, but he let the telepath softly slide to the ground.

There were four ducts. Thora had no idea which one to choose. The Arkonide scrutinized the bare walls, searching for any indication. There had to be something. A commander faced with an emergency situation would, like them, escape to the network of ducts. They'd have to find their way from there as quickly as possible. Which meant there had to be...

A light appeared in one of the ducts. It flickered like the flame of a candle.

Thora stiffened.

"What's wrong?" Rhodan asked.

"There!" She pointed at the flickering light.

"What? What's there"

"The light, of course!" She almost had to scream to make herself heard over the hammering.

"I don't see any light. John?" Rhodan turned to the mind reader. Marshall squinted, looked in the direction she was pointing, and shook his head.

Was the pressure driving her mad? Thora shut her eyes, then opened them again. The light was still there and even appeared to have grown brighter. She walked towards it to get a closer look—and the light moved away from her, into the duct. What did that...

Realizing at last, Thora slapped her forehead. The light was the sign she'd been looking for! A sign only visible to her.

"Second duct from the right!" she said loudly. "Come on!"

The duct rose sharply upwards. The angle grew steeper until it was fully vertical. For this section, Marshall had to be left to his own devices. It was too narrow for her or Rhodan to help him at all.

When they reached level ground again, Marshall sank to the ground, panting. Thora kneeled beside him. The floor's vibration rang through her entire body.

"John?" She leaned over him. "We're almost there. Hold on, okay? We—"

She stopped short as the hammering stopped. The sudden silence felt like a threat.

"What's going on?" She instinctively spoke in a soft tone. "Have the soldiers given up?"

"I doubt it." Rhodan slowly spun around. "De Soto has no reason for that. He can't let us get away."

Marshall stirred. His head jerked up. "They're...setting off a—"

Rhodan whipped around and slammed against Thora with full force. She came down hard on the floor. "What do you think you're doing?" she bellowed. "You—"

An explosion interrupted her. The floor rose up beneath her, and hot air ran over her, trying to drag her away.

A moment later, someone grabbed her by the shoulder. Rhodan.

"Thora!" he roared. "That light! Do you still see it?"

It was still there. The explosion couldn't extinguish it. "Yes!" she managed, pointing to the duct that extended to their right.

"Quickly!" He pulled at her shoulder.

She got to her feet. Rhodan bent down and helped Marshall up. Thora stumbled onwards. Behind her, she heard loud voices. Human voices. The soldiers! They'd catch them, and then...

"Halt!" echoed an order through the duct.

Thora ran faster, following the light. It was their only hope.

"Stop, or we'll shoot!"

The light moved faster and suddenly vanished into the wall. For a brief moment, Thora was paralyzed. Then she realized what was happening. Their salvation. She ran towards the wall. A secret door opened for her, granting her access. With one leap, she was through. She landed, whipped around, and saw Rhodan and Marshall lurching through the duct. Soldiers were streaming in behind them.

"Stop right now!"

The frontmost soldier raised his weapon, aimed, and pulled the trigger. A few shots flew above Rhodan and Marshall's heads, colliding with the steel and ricocheting back through the duct. Then both men were inside. The hidden door closed between them, protecting them from the hail of bullets that followed.

The emergency command center proved to be a small, bare room, just big enough to fit Thora and the two humans.

"This is it?" Rhodan asked. "You're sure?"

He led Marshall, who was leaning on his shoulders, over to the

wall, then gently released his grip. The telepath sank against the wall and sat resting against it. He was pale, and the whites of his eyes had taken on a yellow tinge.

"Yes, of course." Thora struggled to hide her disappointment. The room was dusty. It stank of mold. A chair, mechanically embedded in the floor, was the only furniture to be seen. At least they were safe from the soldiers; the emergency command center was armored.

"Is there water here for John?" Rhodan slowly turned to look around.

"I hope so."

Thora slid into the seat. A holographic menu appeared automatically in front of her, forming a shining crescent. She touched it. From the bare wall to her right, a food and water dispenser unfolded. To Rhodan, it no doubt looked like pure magic. The human went over to the dispenser with as casual an air as if it had been one of his familiar water faucets. Then he formed a bowl with both hands and held it under the opening.

No water flow materialized.

Thora swiped across the holo-menu and called up a display. "The tank's empty. John will have to hold on a little longer."

The Arkonide turned away so that Rhodan couldn't see the tears in her eyes. The empty tank hit her hard. It was Arkonide technology that had failed. Her people's miraculous technology was the basis for her claims of superiority—and her survival depended on it.

Thora made a gesture. A second holo appeared. It floated at head height and looked like a window. It showed the ship's command center, which was full of people. Soldiers in uniform, dozens of men and women in overalls. Technicians, scientists, specialists. Humans who had managed to take a ship that was beyond their wildest dreams and, at least in part, bend it to their will. The energy shield, which was still active, attested to that.

In the middle stood de Soto. The brawny general was bent over a primitive Earth computer tablet, reading a message or report with a level of tranquility that suggested he didn't have puzzling intruders on board. He reminded Thora of her uncle, Charron da Gonozal. The unyielding Charron had made the *Aetron*'s expedition possible, against the express will of the regent. Thora wondered what had happened to him. The regent never forgot a defeat.

Charron would pay for his actions, sooner or later...if he hadn't already.

"De Soto's unflappable." Rhodan had stepped up next to her. "No surprise there. He knows he only has to wait. The shield means we can't get any help from outside. And here on the ship, he has an overwhelming numerical advantage."

"Yes. But he has no idea about the emergency command center."

"And it should stay that way. For now. What condition is the ship in it? Can it be launched?"

Thora slid the holo to the side and went through the ship's status reports. It looked pretty dire. For a moment, she felt like she'd gone back in time to her youth, to the academy on Arkon. The instructors had had an almost sadistic propensity for confronting the cadets with simulations that were impossible to overcome. At least, that had been the shared view of the cadets, only one in ten of whom were admitted to the fleet.

Now Thora realized they had been wrong: the instructors had only been presenting reality. Their strictness had actually been kindness.

"What is it, Thora?" Rhodan urged. "Does it look that bad?"

Thora gave a start. "It doesn't look good, at least. Four of the sixteen impulse drives have malfunctioned, and three more can offer only between twenty-one and forty-six percent of target output. One of the two fusion reactors is operational; the second will be in approximately fourteen hours, the auto-repair routine predicts. The inertial dampers and the anti-grav in roughly seventeen hours."

"The inertial dampers—those are the devices that neutralize the g-forces?"

"Yes. Every Arkonide starship is equipped with them. Without inertial dampers, we could only use a fraction of the propulsion power."

"We'd make it to Terrania without them," said Rhodan.

"I think so, yes." Thora called up more status reports. "But the failure of the anti-grav is more serious. Without anti-grav, the *Tosoma IX* can only be kept afloat by the impulse drives. The series of explosions set off by Ivan Goratschin changed the ship's mass distribution. On top of that, we have so many impulse drives that have failed or are barely holding on."

“Your Positronics should be able to compensate without breaking a sweat. The *Stardust*’s onboard computers—”

“We have no Positronic available.”

“What?”

“The explosions destroyed parts of the Positronic and the backup computers. What remained shut itself off after the crash to prevent any information from falling into enemy hands. De Soto’s people have been clever enough not to touch the Positronic so far. Otherwise they’d have annihilated themselves.”

Rhodan looked at her skeptically. “And the ship itself. A little drastic if you ask me.”

“No,” Thora replied. “The only option. It’s the first thing cadets learn on Arkon. The enemy gets no information, especially not the position of our own worlds and bases. Otherwise you’re courting unimaginable danger.”

“Noted. But you still haven’t answered my question: can you get the ship in the air or not?”

“I can. But what good would that do? We’d still have de Soto and his soldiers to deal with.”

“Sure, but right now they have the superior numbers. If we land in Terrania, the tables will be turned.”

Of course. So obvious. She should have thought of it herself, in fact. *Usually, the long way around is the quickest way!* the instructors had drilled into them again and again.

“I’m slowly starting to understand how you managed to bring Crest over to your side,” Thora said.

“You’re wrong there,” Rhodan replied. “We were never on different sides.”

Thora didn’t say a word. She called up the controls. More holos appeared, showing feeds of the external cameras integrated into the hull. There wasn’t much to see. The shield lay tight around the ship like a wrapper. Several of the planks were gone now; the shield must have disintegrated them. The walls of the pit still held, however.

Rhodan noticed her skeptical gaze. “The walls will slip away as soon as the propulsion units come online.”

“Probably.”

“Loose earth and debris will slide into the shield. Can it absorb a mass like that?”

“Yes. But we won’t have a shield. I need the power for

propulsion."

"Can the hull withstand the stress?"

"Easily." The chair had belts attached to it. Primitive technology, but exactly right for desperate situations like this one. Thora strapped herself in. "Sit next to John and hold him tightly. I can't make any guarantees."

She switched off the shield. On the holo, she saw turmoil break out in the command center.

Thora carefully applied thrust, starting at a fraction of the performance the impulse drives could deliver—a test to see how they responded to real-life stress. Number thirteen, which had so far reported as functional, didn't respond at all.

The ship trembled. A deafening scraping sound filled the room. It was shooting through every room in the ship, Thora knew. A pattering joined it as parts of the pit wall began to slide down and stones and debris beat against the hull.

Thora increased the power. Torturously slowly, like one of the humans' primitive rockets, the craft left the ground. The collapsing walls rubbed and scratched against the hull, then it broke free. The external cameras caught sight of the river valley visible in the bright light of the afternoon sun. The charred ruins of Fort Sunrise jutted out, and next to that was the landing site, the burned out wreck of a helicopter in the middle of it.

De Soto hadn't held back. Thora had expected nothing else. In his place, she'd have done the same thing. But she had no doubt that Sid had taken their companions to safety. Mercant's intuition was good enough that he might even have managed in the den of vipers that was the regent's court.

Gun barrels whirled around to aim at the ship. Soldiers threw themselves onto the wet ground and took aim with their own weapons. They didn't fire. Did the humans recognize that they couldn't do anything against the ship? Or were they following orders from de Soto, who was clever enough to know his limitations?

Thora increased their propulsion. The acceleration forces pushed her into her seat. The ship gained height, and she set a course eastward, towards the Atlantic. The roaring of the drives leveled off once the ship broke through the sound barrier, and she accelerated further. They had done it!

Thora looked at Marshall. The telepath had opened his eyes

again.

"Just hold on, John! Soon we'll be in Terran—"

A brutal impact cut her off.

11.

July 26, 2036
Reginald Bull

"The robot has gone missing?" Crest cried. The old Arkonide came out of the corner he'd retreated into to get away from Tatiana Michalovna. He ignored his cane, now lying on the floor. The shock of Bull's revelation was enough to hold him upright. "How is that possible?"

"We don't know," Bull said. "Not yet."

He gestured to the soldiers to lower their weapons. Michalovna was standing three steps away from Crest. She couldn't do anything to him. Not this almost emaciated-looking woman who was staring at him with wide eyes. Eyes wide with surprise?

"As we speak, specialists from the Chinese army are combing every inch of the examination room, the clinic, and the first floor of the Stardust Tower, looking for clues. I'm sure they'll succeed. Bai Jun dragged the best of the best to the Gobi for his siege."

Bull wished he were as confident as he was pretending to be. Rico's disappearance was totally inexplicable. Impossible...in theory.

"But of course, I'd be thrilled if we could speed up the proceedings a little. Miss Michalovna?" He turned to the Russian. "Where is the robot? What did you do with him?"

"I don't know. I have nothing to do with his disappearance!"

"Oh, really? Can I remind you how things went over the last hour?" Bull put his hands on his hips, standing before the telepath with a broad stance. "The remains of Rico, the robot, arrived in Terrania, disguised as medical supplies. Only Dr. Manoli and Dr. Haggard know about that or about where the examination is to take place. Half an hour later, you come strolling in—a telepath!—you draw Crest out under some pretext and lead us to leave the remains unattended...and *poof*! Another half hour later, the robot's disappeared into thin air. How do you explain that?"

“I... I can’t.” Michalovna swayed. “I didn’t know anything about a robot. I only wanted to speak with Crest. It wasn’t my idea that you, Manoli, and Haggard left the room!”

That was true, Bull had to concede. Manoli had suggested taking a break for fresh air. But, Bull admonished himself, this was no ordinary person he had in front of him.

“And what have you and Crest been chatting about? The weather?”

“None of your business!”

Bull looked at Crest as if prompting him for an answer. The Arkonide blinked and turned his head away. He didn’t say a word. What was going on here?

“Take my word for it, Mr. Bull,” the Russian reaffirmed. “It’s a private matter.”

Reginald Bull snorted. “How dumb do you think I am? Private?! You don’t even know Crest! The only thing you...”

He forced himself to stop talking. Michalovna had been a loyal henchman of Clifford Monterny, the suggestor. But not because he’d forced her with his gift of suggestion. The telepath had been immune to Monterny’s powers. She had served him of her own free will. She had interrogated Crest.

Bull walked towards the telepath so that he could talk to her up close, face to face. Halfway there, he stopped. Her breath stank of booze. He froze in place. The Russian was half-drunk! The instant he realized that, the image he’d formed of her fell apart. Tatiana Michalovna was no sinister supervillain manipulating ordinary people with her telepathic powers like puppets on strings. She was an ordinary person. A weak, desperate person.

“Miss Michalovna,” he said softly, “help us out here! I’ve just explained the circumstances. How am I supposed to trust you?”

She lowered her head, then raised it again. “I... I have a proposal. I’m ready to open myself up to John Marshall. On condition that he keeps what he reads in my thoughts to himself. He’ll tell you that I had nothing to do with this. You do trust John, don’t you?”

“I do. But John’s not in Terrania right now. You know that.”

“I didn’t know that at all. You’re overestimating me.”

Was he? He tried to see the woman standing before him through different eyes. Michalovna was in her mid-twenties. A petite woman with full lips painted too garishly for his taste. She

came from Saint Petersburg. He tried to picture her in her homeland. Bull had spent a few days in the Great Russian capital during a goodwill tour that Pounder, NASA's flight director, had forced him into a few years back. Bull had bristled against it, picturing cold and darkness and gloomy people, but Saint Petersburg in June had been a warm place, full of life, with long days that never seemed to end and young people partying on every square in the city.

Michalovna was young—but she didn't belong to that world of sunshine. Her lips were chapped, sweat caked her hair, and crow's feet had engraved themselves in the corners of her eyes prematurely. Her gift, Bull understood, was a weight that pushed the Russian down, threatening to suffocate her.

The telepath noticed that the cogs were turning. "Mr. Bull, I'm ready to lay myself completely bare. What more can I do?" She looked at him, her gaze imploring.

"You don't belong here," he replied on the spur of the moment. "Why don't you leave?"

"I'd like nothing better. I didn't want to come to your city."

"It's not my city."

"Sure." She shrugged. "But you're right. I don't belong here. But can you name a single place on Earth where I *do* belong?"

"You could go back to your homeland. To Russia."

"Russia's not my home anymore. Besides, I'd never make it past the border. The secret service knows who I am and what I can do. I'm too valuable to be left in peace."

And too dangerous! Bull thought. No nation on Earth would let her escape unscathed. A mind reader was a potentially unbeatable weapon—and one that you preferably wanted on your side.

Common sense told him that this also applied to their dream of Terra. They needed people like Michalovna to make it a reality. Bull's feelings told him that he should chase this woman out of the city. He just wanted to be rid of her. Instead of a thousand unsolvable problems piled up in front of him, he wished he had nine hundred and ninety nine. What should he do with her?

Bai Jun relieved him of the need to find an answer. The former general entered Crest's apartment. He was wearing a data visor that covered his face down to the middle of his cheeks. Reflections of light that Bull could recognize as incoming status reports scurried across the display.

Bai Jun stopped next to Bull and slid the visor up. “Terrania is closed off now. Not even a desert mouse will make it in or out without us knowing.”

“And have you caught the first mice already?”

“No, but it’s only a matter of time. My people are everywhere in the city and in the tunnels created during the siege. Whoever’s behind this theft will get nervous and make a mistake. Then we’ll strike.”

There was a glazed aspect to the general’s expression, as if his attention were only partly there in the room. This observation was true, Bull realized. Bai Jun had a headset in his ear and was listening to reports coming in.

“What’s the situation at the clinic?”

“We’re hard at work. My people have found DNA samples that aren’t a match for you, Crest, Miss Michalovna, or the two doctors. We’re checking the clinic staff and will question those involved in good time.”

Bai Jun turned his head away and whispered into his headset in Chinese.

“You see, Miss Michalovna,” said Bull, “your accomplices are as good as caught. Please, rethink your decision! Tell us the truth! I give you my word that nothing will happen to you.”

The Russian threw her hands over her face and sank down with her back against the wall. She sobbed quietly.

“Mr. Bull?” Crest said cautiously. The Arkonide appeared to have made a decision. He sought eye contact with Bull and held it. “You’re wrong. This woman is innocent.”

And you’re only coughing that up now? Bull thought. *Why did you stay silent all this time? What do* you *have to hide, Arkonide?*

“I’d love to believe you, Crest.”

“My word isn’t enough for you?”

“Honestly, no.” Bull stroked his chin, where scratchy red stubble had grown. “There’s too much at stake. Terrania’s a dream come true. A symbol of hope. For a better world, a more just society. You know that as well as I do. This tower, built to your plan, is the tangible proof.” Bull stamped his foot. “But Terrania’s just a foot in the door. It could still be taken from us at any time. To keep us going, we need every last bit of Arkonide tech we can get our paws on.”

“May I point out that this robot is not of Arkonide origin?

Furthermore, it's nothing but charred remains."

"You may. Both of those details are correct, and both of them are beside the point. These charred remains are the product of technology that might far surpass anything the Arkonides can do. Isn't that right?"

Crest didn't reply, confirming Bull's suspicion.

"We can learn an endless amount from the remains of this robot. That's why I can't just let this lie. That's why I'll move heaven and Earth to find out what happened. And that's why I'm asking you one last time: what were you and Tatiana Michalovna talking about?"

A wet gleam found Crest's eyes. Tears welled up and ran down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bull. I can't tell you that. Our conversation was confidential."

Bull was used to running against brick walls and getting a bloody nose. He'd been a fat kid. The blob everyone had teased in the school yard, laughed at in gym class, and beaten up on the way home. His parents, who had been busy pushing the blame onto each other for the fact that their lives hadn't gone the way they'd imagined it, hadn't noticed his plight. The young Reginald had fled. Into himself and to the stars in books and films. And little by little, he'd found the strength in himself to persist. The fat boy had become a stout young man. The son of an unemployed auto worker had become a scholarship holder, then a test pilot, and finally an astronaut.

Reginald Bull had paved the way, every meter of it, with his own strength. Often his winning friendliness had helped him along, but just as often it had been his tenacity that bordered on stubbornness. For Bull, a punch in the face was merely an invitation to come and get the next one, Manoli had remarked once, hitting the nail on the head. Only, as the doctor had continued, this strategy wasn't always clever. There were situations where tenacity led you down a dead-end road that gave you two, three, or four bloody noses instead of just one. Sometimes you couldn't break through a wall with your head. Sometimes you had to climb over the wall. Or go around it. Or leap it in a single bound.

But how would he manage any of that? Crest and Michalovna had a secret, and they'd keep it to themselves no matter how much he begged or threatened. This wall was insurmountable.

"Mr. Bull?" Bai Jun had stopped over to his side again.

“What’s up?”

“We’re receiving a distress call over the coms. A few volunteers have located some smugglers, but they’re outmatched.”

A thought came to him: what if he simply turned his back on the wall?

“Where are they?”

“About forty kilometers northwest of Terrania, in the desert.”

The chances of these smugglers being the ones who’d stolen Rico were minuscule. But it would do him good to get away from endlessly talking and getting his nose bloodied—and afterwards, maybe he’d know how to proceed.

“Do you have a helicopter ready to go?”

Bai Jun smiled. “It just landed on the roof of the Stardust Tower.”

“I expected nothing less from you.” He returned the smile. “Come on, let’s get going! The soldiers will make sure Miss Michalovna doesn’t slip away!”

The other man stayed rooted to the spot.

“What are you waiting for, Bai Jun?”

“Nothing. I’m not coming.”

“Why not?”

“My place is here. A good general doesn’t position himself at the front of his troops, but behind them. He makes sure their operations are well thought out and well equipped. That applies just as much to *former* generals.”

Bull looked at the short man standing in front of him. “Thank you, Bai Jun,” he said and turned to go, ready to climb up the anti-grav shaft.

A voice held him back. “Mr. Bull, a moment, please!”

Tatiana Michalovna stood in the middle of the room. She wasn’t crying anymore, but her eyes were red. “Take me with you!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know what you have in mind, but maybe you could use a telepath?”

Bull hesitated, then pulled himself together. “Yeah, maybe. Come on!”

12.

July 26, 2036
Mildred Orsons

Four minutes after the ATV had left them standing in a cloud of dust on the edge of Terrania, Julian Tifflor, Mildred Orsons, and Timothy Harnahan entered an empty shell of a building in the northwest of the city.

Julio was waiting for them, visor up, arms crossed, and proud of his work: two Royal Enfield Bullets gleaming as if they'd just left the workshop in Indian Chennai. After four minutes and thirty seconds, Julian had thanked Julio with a clap on the shoulder, put on the helmet, and raced out into the morning sun.

Timothy watched him go, stunned and gasping for words. "That's madness! They'll be over the mountains by now. There's no way he can catch up."

Mildred had climbed onto the other bullet. The worn-out leather saddle that had bothered her so much for the first few days now felt comfortably familiar. "You don't know Tiff. Are you in, Timothy?"

"Of course! What do you think?"

He rushed to get on behind her. Mildred put on her helmet and set the motor running. It came on in an instant, roaring powerfully. Julio hadn't just given the chrome a spit and polish. She gave a thumbs-up to the Spaniard who dreamed of being linked to machines, then hit the gas.

She heard a startled yell from behind her. Timothy clutched her tightly, his fingers pressing almost painfully into her hips.

"Your boyfriend is crazy!" he roared. His words were just loud enough to make out despite the airstream and revving motor.

"I know," she replied.

Mildred teased Julian about it often enough. Every day, in fact. Her "space cadet." He *was* crazy in his way. He always got impossible ideas into his head. To sneak into the forbidden city of

Lhasa as a foreigner. To cross through Afghanistan, a war zone for decades, on foot. To approach Terrania on decommissioned former Indian military motorcycles from Ulaanbaatar. Or even to go on a manhunt through the desert.

Once Julian had an idea in his head, he wouldn't let anyone hold him back. But there was one thing that was even more important to him than adventure: justice.

Mildred believed he'd inherited that trait from his father. The father whose overbearing shadow he had run away from. William Tifflor was one of the top lawyers in the United States, with fees reaching tens of millions. At the same time, he repeatedly waived his fees for people with no money to fight for justice on their behalf. It had started when he was still a student and had fought for the inmates of Guantanamo Bay, and later he'd helped Occupy activists but also radical libertarians and right-wing gun nuts. Most recently, the alien Crest da Zoltral. William Tifflor had dared to defend the elderly Arkonide in the show trial President Drummond had held in Washington. Julian's father had made a mess of the carefully orchestrated show and possibly thrown his life away in the process. William Tifflor had disappeared without a trace.

Julian had often complained about his father to her. He wanted to be different but was far more like him than he knew. Justice was the only reason Julian Tifflor was racing through the desert in a cloud of dust. Not three bottles of water. Not whatever that man had stolen in Terrania. It was the audacity of this man in putting his own rights above those of everyone else.

Terrania quickly fell into the distance behind them. Mildred focused on the cloud that unmistakably marked Julian's path. She followed it but was careful to stay at an angle behind it. She'd swallowed enough sand and dust.

Gradually, she closed the gap. The vehicle was running smoothly, better than ever before. Julio had taken off the heavy equipment they had needed for the desert crossing. Compared to that, Timothy weighed nothing at all.

Despite that, their chances were slim. The ATV had a head start of several minutes. The course was sandy, churned up by countless wheels over the last few weeks. Dips had formed. In some places, the sand was so deep that the Bullet seemed at risk of sinking.

Again and again, the bike went into a swerve, and Mildred had to throttle back and let the Bullet coast for a few minutes until it

had stabilized before cautiously accelerating again. The ATV had it easier. Its four-wheel drive was computer controlled, preventing individual wheels from spinning out or the vehicle from skidding. The driver just had to step on the gas; the rest was regulated by the machine itself.

Mildred and Julian only had the sense for the desert that they'd picked up over the last few days.

Timothy pushed even closer to her. He was stiff as a board.

"What do you think that guy stole?" she bellowed to distract him from his fear.

"Tough to say," he shouted back. "It looked like a corpse. Or parts of one. Pretty grim!"

"I don't think so. Why would they want a dead body? And there was metal there!"

"Yeah, true."

"An Arkonide robot?" she guessed.

"No way. I've never seen one that looks like a person!"

The dust cloud marking Julian's location was no longer moving. He had stopped. He waved at Mildred, indicating that she should pull up next to him.

Julian had taken off his helmet. Dust had made it inside, forming dark stripes on his bare skin, further emphasizing his angular features.

"There, up ahead! That must be them!" He extended his arm, pointing to a dust cloud to the northwest.

"There's only desert that way!" Timothy interjected.

"Yeah. No wonder they wanted to get as much water as they could."

"But there's nothing out there!"

"Not for a few hundred kilometers, no. But to the north, there's Mongolia. It's practically a civil war there. The perfect place to go into hiding with their booty, wouldn't you say?" He bent down and swiped at the pod mounted on the handlebars with his palm. "Mildred, look at the map!"

Mildred swiped at her display as well, then held both hands around the edges of it as if protecting a candle flame from the wind. It was almost noon. The sun was high in the sky, making the sand-and-dust-worn screen a struggle to read.

"On the way to Terrania, we passed by about ten kilometers from here," said Julian. "The plain keeps going to the south and

west, ending in the western Mongolian sand desert."

Mildred's pod automatically received the image from Julian's device. It showed almost exclusively featureless brown. Then he shifted that portion. Contour lines appeared. Hills intersected by long, almost dead-straight valleys.

"To the north, the rock desert begins," Julian explained. "If Mongolia's their goal, they'll have to cross that, and this valley here is the quickest way. There's a path there that's traversable for the ATV." One of the lines on the screen lit up. "But," he continued, "a second, more narrow valley runs parallel to that." A second line lit up. "Both valleys lead to this ridge. Do you see it?"

"Yeah." Timothy had stood up in his seat to peer over Mildred's shoulder. "But what good does that do us?"

"We'll split up. You'll stay on the ATV. I'll ride along the parallel valley, overake it, then turn around and block them off at this bottleneck." Julian zoomed in on the map. "Not far from the ridge, they have to go between these rocks. The bottleneck is just wide enough for one vehicle to get through—as long as there's nothing in the way. Everyone clear?"

He put his helmet back on and drove off without waiting for an answer. Mildred followed him. In less than a minute they'd reached the entrance to the narrow valley. Julian turned off and soon disappeared among the head-high rocks scattered across the ground.

Mildred continued across the treacherously soft sand until the wider valley opened up before her. She turned right, and they left the sand behind, the landscape replaced by rocks and gravel.

Mildred accelerated. Freed from the sand's invisible claws, the Bullet gladly complied. *This* was their chance. The heavy ATV was at a disadvantage in this terrain. They'd catch up—if Julian's educated guess was accurate and the thieves had taken this route.

A lane that had to be more sensed than seen followed the valley in wide curves, crossing the rough terrain several times. It was a seasonal riverbed. It rarely rained in the Gobi, but when it did, the water fell from the sky in amounts heavy enough that flowing rivers formed within hours, only to dry up again just as quickly.

Were they correct? Mildred eyed the way in front of her searchingly. Once in a while, she passed small remnants of sand. Several times, she thought she saw tire tracks, but she wasn't sure. She was moving too quickly, and stopping was out of the question.

She had to stay the course and back Julian up.

The valley grew narrower, turning into a gully. Rock walls began to rise up on both sides, increasingly high. The path and the riverbed became one. The Bullet acted up as the suspension couldn't balance out the shocks anymore. Mildred pulled back on the gas and looked at the pod. She was almost at the spot Julian planned to stop the ATV.

They passed an outcrop. The riverbed narrowed and veered sharply to the left—and there was the ATV!

Mildred hit the brakes. Timothy was thrown hard against her back. She hardly even noticed the pain. Her entire attention was on the scene in front of her. Thirty meters away was Julian. He'd positioned the Bullet diagonally across the path. He'd taken off his helmet and raised one arm into the air. He had an open palm. A stop sign.

On the ATV's cargo bed stood the man they'd been following. He'd taken off the backpack and instead held a Chinese assault rifle in his hands. Aiming at Julian, he said, "Out of the way! Or..."

Julian didn't move.

The breath caught in Mildred's throat. She wanted to drive full throttle, to hurry to Julian's aid. But she suppressed the impulse. She'd get there too late. She couldn't help him.

She felt Timothy shifting his weight behind her. Did he mean to run to Julian? She turned around to hold him back. But there was no need. Timothy Harnahan simply did what he always did when faced with a tough task: he pulled his tablet out of his pocket.

13.

July 25, 2036
John Marshall

The ship fell.

John Marshall fell. Then he felt himself lifting upwards. Weightless. For a moment, he forgot all about his painful limbs, the hammering in his skull, his tortuous thirst.

The spacedrives had cut out. All was silent. For ordinary people; not for Marshall. The telepath heard thoughts, the fearful cries of dozens—no, hundreds of people. They were unbearably loud, reverberating in his mind. He curled up, burying his head in his hands, pressing his fingers into his ears. It did him no good.

Thora hissed loudly. Arkonide cursing, no doubt. Her hands flew over the horseshoe of light floating before her. Marshall was reminded of a drummer playing a solo.

"What's wrong?" Rhodan asked.

"Spacedrive three has exploded."

"How can that happen? The ship reported it as operational!"

"I know." The Arkonide paused to think for a moment. Her eyes were glimmering wetly. She was trembling. Not with fear, with rage. Then she cried, "Lie flat on the ground!"

Rhodan threw himself down, quick as a flash. Marshall tipped himself over to the left. His upper body slid against the cold steel.

The spacedrives came online with a roar. The lightness of free fall ended abruptly. Marshall was pushed against the floor with a force as if his weight had quadrupled. He heard Rhodan groaning next to him on the floor. His face was an ugly grimace, invisible fingers trying to pull the flesh from his bones.

He heard himself screaming. In his mind, he heard the screams of soldiers. No one had warned them what was going to happen. They... One train of thought stuck out from the choir of voices. It was calm, composed. Marshall knew that voice.

The crushing weight slowly faded.

“Done,” said Thora, swiping across the horseshoe of light with a motion almost like a caress. “The crash has been prevented. The ship is stable again.”

Rhodan stood up. Effortlessly. As if the g-force hadn’t threatened to squash him too. It had to be the training, Marshall realized. Sid had raved about it often enough: the extraordinary strain that astronauts (honored heroes in Sid’s eyes) had to be able to withstand. Until very recently, Perry Rhodan had been one of those.

“How can there have been an explosion like that?” Rhodan asked.

“Defects in the diagnostic sensors, I assume. The control system must have supplied the spacedrive with an energy value far in excess of what it could handle. Or...”

Marshall heard Thora’s voice as if from a great distance. His mind was focused on the familiar thought-voice. He sensed a degree of determination that scared him.

“Or,” Thora continued, “General de Soto’s people damaged the spacedrive without knowing it. They’ve been examining the entire...”

De Soto! He was picking up the general’s thoughts!

“D..de S...Soto!” Marshall only managed a hoarse croak. His mouth was too dry. “It... It was no accident! De Soto blew up the spacedrive!”

Rhodan and Thora looked at him, dumbfounded. Rhodan kneeled down beside him and cradled his head. “Has the man lost his senses? That’s downright suicide!”

“He knew that. But he’ll destroy the ship before he’ll let us take it!”

“Are you sure, John?”

The telepath listened to the thoughts. “Yes. He’s made up his mind.”

He felt Rhodan’s hand stiffen against the back of his head for a moment. “John, does de Soto know who we are?”

Marshall concentrated. “No. He thinks we’re mutants who used to work for Monterny and defected to Rhodan.”

“Good.” Rhodan softly lowered Marshall’s head to the floor. “Stay there and rest, John. Save your energy, okay? We need you!”

Rhodan stood. “Thora, can you establish a connection with de Soto?”

“Of course. Why, though?”

“I want to talk to him. We have to stop this madness.”

“I don’t think that man...”

“Me neither. But we have to try. Please, contact the general!”

Thora hesitated for a moment—did she have to overcome her pride?—then two of those holograms appeared that seemed to Marshall like he was looking through a window. Thora simply called them “holos.”

Rhodan cleared his throat. “General de Soto!”

The brawny man slowly turned towards the camera. Had he suspected this was coming? Yes, Marshall read in his thoughts.

“Ah, our wannabe president!” he said. “Ready to give yourself up?”

“There’s no reason for that.”

“Is that what you think? My engineers are just preparing the remaining spacedrives. In...” The general raised his arm and looked at his wristwatch. “In four minutes and thirty-seven seconds, we’ll blow up one more.”

“Please, general, I ask you to reconsider your decision. This ship is little more than a wreck. Are you willing to sacrifice your life for that? And the lives of the men and women serving under you?” Rhodan’s tone was pointedly rational.

“If necessary, yes. I’m a soldier. I swore an oath to protect my homeland. At the cost of my life, if it comes to that. I have no intention of breaking that oath.”

“Your courage and integrity have my respect, general. But a new era has dawned! Your oath—”

“What the hell did that traitor Rhodan do to you?” the general interrupted. “Have his mutants brainwashed you or something? Or are you betraying your country for money? Are—”

Rhodan gave Thora a signal. The holo disappeared as if it had never existed.

“John?” Rhodan looked at him with a question in his eyes.

“He... He meant every word,” Marshall said. His mouth was so dry that every syllable hurt. “De Soto has been in the army since he was eighteen. He’s spent his entire adult life in it. A half dozen wars, four injuries, capture, torture... All for his country. He *can’t* give in.”

“Then we have to put him and his people out of action.” Rhodan turned to the Arkonide. “Thora, you said mutinies are one

of the reasons this emergency command center exists. So it must provide a means of fighting the mutineers, right?"

"Yes, in theory. I have the choice of poisoning them, making them suffocate, or merely deafening them. But sadly, you were right just now: this ship is literal more than a wreck. Those functions aren't responding."

"What about robots? Can we deploy machines against de Soto?"

"You know the answer. Yes, in theory. But this ship doesn't have any on hand."

Rhodan didn't back down. "How about a surprise attack?"

"With our bare hands? The armories are empty, including the ones in the emergency command center."

Time was running short. Marshall picked up the general's order to prime the fuse for the explosives on spacedrive six.

"Under the circumstances, I see no other option except giving ourselves up," Rhodan said.

"What?" Thora whipped around. "Have *you* lost your senses? Have you already forgotten what these people did to Crest?"

"They put him on trial." Rhodan withstood her furious gaze. "But up to that point, they treated him well. They knew how valuable he was. And de Soto's no idiot. He wants us alive. But he won't get to enjoy our company for long. Sid and Mercant will get us out of here."

"If they can find us! De Soto and Drummond are no idiots—you're right about that, Rhodan. They'll make sure no one can ever find us. And then..." Tears welled up in Thora's eyes. "No! *I* will not give myself up."

"Then we'll die!"

"No, *they* will die!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"That we don't need any weapons to put an end to de Soto." She pointed at the glowing horseshoe. "I'm controlling the ship's functions. Including the airlocks and hatches."

"How does that help us? If you close all those, you'll have trapped the soldiers. But that doesn't stop them blowing up the spacedrives!"

"I don't mean to close them, but to open them."

Rhodan looked at the glowing horseshoe. "That won't work. We're about three thousand meters off the ground. The air is thin, but not thin enough for the soldiers to lose consciousness. De Soto

will still be able to light the fuses!"

"Not if we go about it the right way. You've experienced the level of thrust the spacedrives are capable of. De Soto and his people will be helplessly stuck to the floor until we leave Earth's atmosphere."

Rhodan suddenly turned pale. "At which point they'll suffocate! That would be murder!"

"False. It would be self-defense! These people want to kill us; we don't want to kill them."

"And we're supposed to stoop to their level? No!"

"Then make a better suggestion, Rhodan. You still have two minutes and fourteen seconds!"

Marshall groaned. It was too much. Rhodan's anger. Thora's anger, and her despair. De Soto's grim determination. The fear of the soldiers, kept in check by the discipline that had been drilled into them.

The telepath couldn't fend it off anymore. The others' anger became his; the others' despair became his. He reared up. He wanted to get away from here. To hide away. Be alone. Finally alone again. And drink something. The thirst... "W... Water...to drink... I..."

Rhodan bent down over him. "Soon, John. De Soto will give you water. The general—"

Thora cut him off. "Water!" she cried. "That's it!" She unfastened the belts, then went to her knees next to Marshall. She rested a hand on his forehead. Her fingers felt ice cold to him. The sensation did him good.

"John, you say de Soto has no fear of dying. But every Arkonide, every human, every living being is afraid of *something*. You read in the general's thoughts that the narcos took him and Drummond captive, right?"

"Y... Yes."

"The narcos tortured them. *They* made de Soto afraid. With water!" Thora lifted her hand from his forehead and grasped both of his. "John, can you listen again? Can you confirm that?"

"I... I can try." The telepath closed his eyes and fully opened up to de Soto, delving again into the general's mindscape. He returned to Afghanistan, to Iraq, to Colombia...and stopped there.

A hut in the jungle. Thirst, always thirst. Vermin. A narco soldier who says, "You're thirsty? We'll give you water!" Then a table. Four

men holding him down. A towel stretched across his face. "Here's your water!" Cold water sprays onto him. A flow with no end runs over his face, his mouth, up his nose, inside him...

Marshall reared up. He gasped for air, but there was only water. It went into his lungs. He retched. He...

"John!" said a voice. "John, it's over! You're here, with us!" Hands held his head, his shoulders. Hands that pulled at him, dragged him back to himself.

The retching turned into a dry cough. He opened his eyes. Rhodan and Thora, their faces very close. Full of worry.

"John?" Rhodan said. "Are you okay now?"

"Y... Yes," he replied, coughing. "The general... They tortured him in Colombia. Waterboarding. Even the thought of drowning sends him into a panic."

"We can use that to break him!" said Thora. "He's more afraid of drowning than of death!"

"No!" said Rhodan. He spoke loudly, but didn't shout.

"Why not?" Thora looked at him, disconcerted. "Is there a flaw in my plan?"

"No. But it's wrong. Morally wrong."

Thora took a moment to respond. "This man is trying to kill us. He wants to kill your dream. *That* is morally wrong!"

"That absolutely does not mean we should—"

A second explosion rocked the ship. Marshall screamed as the impact hurled him into the wall. He felt a body fall onto him. Rhodan. The jolt had yanked him off his feet. He didn't get up again. The ship began to flounder.

"That insolent upstart!" Thora shouted. "Who does he think he is?" The belts held her safely in her seat. Her hands swiped quickly across the glowing horseshoe. The spacedrives roared into action, coming online with a force that drove the air from Marshall's lungs. After long, endlessly long seconds, the pressure subsided again.

"De Soto!" A new holo had appeared. It showed the brawny soldier. He was on his knees. "Stop this nonsense this instant!" Thora said it in the same tone you'd use to tell off a naughty child.

The general blinked. He was a sensitive man. "'Nonsense,' you say? You're forcing my hand. If you'd only follow the same common sense as any other human and—"

"That's not possible for me."

"Don't sell yourself short. You're quite capable of—"

“I’m not a human.”

Thora lowered her head and buried her face in both hands. Her long fingernails ripped at the skin on her forehead. Raising her head again, she tore off the mask with one pull. Immaculate pale skin was revealed. A long Arkonide face with two competing emotions: rage and disgust.

The general’s eyes widened. “You’re... You’re that Arkonide! Thora!”

“Correct. Thora da Zoltral. Of the house of Gonozal, one of the oldest, most noble of the families that led Arkon to its greatness, unrivaled in the galaxy. My forebears set out to the stars, savored their wonders, while your forebears were still busy freezing in their caves and beating the marrow out from the bones of their mangy prey.”

With two quick hand movements, she removed her contact lenses. It looked to Marshall as though a fire burned in the red pupils now visible.

“Thora da Zoltral, who knows only disdain for barbarians like you. Thora da Zoltral, who caused a bloodbath among the Chinese besiegers of the energy dome. Thora da Zoltral, who a few days ago flew this ship to your pathetic little planet in righteous anger and destroyed what she disliked as suited her whim. Do you really wish to oppose me?”

The general was a man of exceptional courage. “Yes,” he said simply and meant it. Marshall read it in his thoughts.

“I’ll offer you one last chance, General. You and your subordinates have five minutes to vacate the command center and all other parts of the ship and assemble in hangar four. By the honor of my house, I swear that you and your soldiers will remain unharmed and can return to your homeland after the ship has landed.”

“You know the situation, Thora da Zoltral. I’m the one who makes the demands.” The general had put his hands on his hips. Veins of anger bulged on his forehead.

The Arkonide didn’t allow herself to be cowed. “You believe you are fighting for a just cause, don’t you, General?”

“I am.”

“For what? For a nation?”

“Yes. The United States of America.”

“Do you believe this pathetic planet is American? Its moon, on

which your fellows planted your laughable flag? This solar system? This galaxy?"

"The ideals of our nation are universal."

"Spare me your prattle about ideals, General! You're threatening to kill me. Me, my comrades, and your soldiers!"

"It's my ideal to make the ultimate sacrifice for my nation."

Thora was silent for a few seconds. Then she said quietly, "You believe you have nothing to fear, General, correct?"

"I know death too well to fear it."

"You're deluding yourself," she said softly.

The suppressed roar of the spacedrives holding the ship in the air abruptly died out. They fell.

"Do you remember Colombia, General?" Thora asked. "A dirty war to bring a halt to a dirty business. You and Stan fought there out of deep conviction. For a just cause. And yet, while you were there, you learned the meaning of fear."

"What... How do you know?"

"I know, General. I know far more about you as well. And I wish only the best for you and yours. I'm certain your son Philip will pull through."

"How..." The general broke off. "No one on Earth could know that!"

"You forget who you're dealing with. I'm not from Earth. This planet is no longer the exclusive playground of your species. It never will be again." Thora looked at the glowing horseshoe. "A thousand meters to go." She looked up again. "But back to fear. They tortured you in Colombia, General. But they couldn't break you. Until the day they put a towel over your face..."

"Stop!"

"Why should I? It must be awful to drown—what do you think?" She cast another glance at the horseshoe. "Less than five hundred meters. Below us is the North Atlantic. Water. As far as the eye can see." Thora put her left hand onto the glowing horseshoe. The sound of falling changed to a whistling sound. "Do you smell the fresh, salty air, General? Sea air. It's rushing into the ship's open airlocks."

The spacedrives came on, stopping the free fall. A hard impact followed; something slammed against the hull. The waves.

Water!

Marshall heard the general shriek in his thoughts.

“You know this planet, General. How deep do you think the sea is at this location?”

De Soto trembled. The ship began to sway as the waves embraced it.

“Why aren’t you answering me, General? You’ve never been lost for words before.”

Thora brought up more holos. They showed dark sea water flowing into the lower decks in torrential streams.

“Here, General. You deserve a clear view of the descent.”

De Soto looked up. Thora must have enabled the same holos in the main command center.

“Well, General? How long do you think it will take for the ship to sink?”

“You’d never allow that!”

“Do you think you’re the only one here who’s ready to sacrifice their life for a just cause? What do you imagine the Grand Imperium is built on? It’s not our warships, our technological superiority. No. It’s the Arkonides’ unconditional readiness to self-sacrifice. It would bring me deep satisfaction to pay tribute to my ancestors!”

The ship began to sink. The water of the Atlantic ran in through one of the holes in the hull. The ship slowly tipped to the side.

“But don’t worry, General. You won’t suffer for long. How long can a human survive without air? One, maybe two minutes, then it’s over. Do you believe your ancestors are waiting for you in the afterlife?”

“I... I...” Marshall groaned as the general’s panic overwhelmed his thoughts. Then, in an instant, it was over. De Soto had broken.

“You’ve won, Arkonide,” the general whispered in a flat tone. “We surrender.”

“Get yourselves to the hangar!”

Thora bent over the horseshoe. Spacedrives roaring, the ship freed itself from the waves.

14.

July 26, 2036
Julian Tifflor

"Out of the way!"

Julian was staring down the barrel of an assault rifle.

It was like time had slowed down. His pulse, which had been hammering until just now with all the tension of hunting down the thieves, now seemed to stand still. Julian felt every stone under his boots, as if no soles were protecting them. The sun burned on his skin; the hot air drove into his lungs, drying him from the inside out. He was thirsty.

Julian was afraid. He wanted to run away. But he couldn't—no, he *wouldn't* do that.

He forced his gaze away from the gun and over to the man. "The weapon is nothing," his father had told him again and again when they spoke about the cases he defended. "What matters is the person holding it."

The man holding the weapon was skinny and pale. He had washed his face and beaten the dirt out of his clothes. He must have done it on the journey, with the valuable water he'd stolen in Terrania. His appearance had to be very important to him. What he'd stolen had to mean a lot to him too. Otherwise he wouldn't have lowered himself to getting dirty.

"Can't you hear me?" the man roared. English wasn't his first language; the hard, rolled "r" made that clear. "Get out of the way!"

When Julian was a child, his father had once confronted a burglar in their home. The man had been armed. His father, who had only just won a precedent-setting case for the National Rifle Association that assured free access to handguns, had been unarmed; he was opposed to firearms in his own life. How could he have been crazy enough to confront an armed man with his bare hands?

His father had replied, "I wasn't crazy. I was stronger than him.

I knew that I stood for what was right. He knew that what he was doing was wrong."

That answer had made an impression on Julian. But only now, thousands of kilometers away in this desert, did he understand it fully.

This man and his companions were thieves. They had stolen Arkonide technology, which they no doubt hoped to sell to get money and a life of luxury or whatever. Their motivation was strong, but it was weak compared to his.

Julian knew that he stood for a just cause. He was stronger than the man with the gun.

"No," he said.

Julian looked past him to the man's two companions, who had stayed seated and were looking up at the weapon. A woman and a man. Their eyes were wide, as if they feared the man with the gun.

Mildred and Timothy had caught up. They were within earshot, but much too far away to be able to help him. Timothy had bent down over his tablet; he appeared to have forgotten everything around him. He was murmuring to himself. Mildred was trying to make eye contact with Julian and slowly shaking her head. She knew him. She knew he wouldn't give in. She thought he was insane—and at the same time, she loved him for it. A warm feeling spread through Julian's stomach, bolstering him.

"For the last time, kid!" the man cried. "Get out of the way! You have no right to stop us."

"You're mistaken. I have the right."

"Oh? Does the desert belong to you or something?"

"Yes. As much as it belongs to you and your friends. I'm a Terran." He put a hand on the armband he'd gotten in Terrania. "Just like you are. Earth belongs to us all, including this desert, and Terrania—and everything that comes with it. But you stole something! You're thieves!"

"You're insane, kid!"

"I hear that a lot."

"Where I come from, lunatics get dealt with pretty quickly."

The man fired. The bullet hit the ground by Julian's feet, split a stone, then ricocheted away. The echo of the shot underscored their crying.

Julian would have loved to run away and hide. He stayed put.

The woman sitting in the backseat jumped up. She went to put

a hand on the gunman's arm, but at the last minute she hesitated and sat back down again. In the corner of his mind that was soberly observing, Julian registered that she was petite. An Asian woman, younger than the two men.

"The next one's going in you. Out of the way!"

"No!"

"Your call. Don't say I didn't warn you." The man lifted the assault rifle again and aimed.

Julian closed his eyes. He thought of his father, who never gave in when he was standing up for what he believed was right. Of Mildred, who didn't let anyone tell her what to do. Of Ernst Ellert, who had given everything for his dream and was now lying in a basement in Terrania in a no-man's-land between life and death. He...

"You're not a murderer, Raskujan," called a sudden voice. "Put the gun away!"

Julian opened his eyes. A man stood next to him, stocky and strongly built. He had short red hair. A barely healed wound ran over his left cheek. A second ran along his eyebrow. Wasn't this...

"Reginald Bull!" cried the gunman. "How did you get here?" The barrel of the weapon sank a little.

Bull ignored the question. "I'll tell you again. Put the gun away, Raskujan. It doesn't suit you. Not nearly as well as the champagne glass you had in your hand when we last saw each other in Baikonur."

"That was a long time ago."

"Not even three years."

"In a different era." The barrel jerked up again. Raskujan had made up his mind. "That's in the past! And now you're going to get out of the way—both of you!"

"I don't think so. And I'm sure we'll come to a reasonable solution, like civilized people." Bull snapped his fingers. He raised his head and made a show of looking upwards.

Julian followed his gaze. Chinese soldiers had taken up position on the rocks all around. There had to be a dozen or more. Their weapons were aimed squarely at Raskujan.

Raskujan fell silent. He squinted, as if he didn't trust his eyes, didn't want to believe the sudden turn of events. Then he lowered the assault rifle, engaged the safety, and threw it down next to the ATV. Scornfully, as if he was angry at himself for stooping low

enough to resort to violence.

"I knew I could count on you, Raskujan." Bull nodded with satisfaction. "And now I want to know what's going on here! Why are you waving a gun around?"

"I was just trying to clear the way."

"Where are you going?"

"Where do you think? Home."

"You don't like Terrania?"

"Terrania is a bad joke!" Raskujan balled his hands into fists. "It's supposed to be Earth's capital, the gateway to the stars. And you're making people dig into the ground with folding shovels! My friends and I have had enough, that's all. We were on the way home —and then this overgrown child shows up and stands in our way! Tell him to get out of here!"

Bull turned to Julian. "We haven't met yet. Who are you?"

"Julian. Julian Tifflor."

"And those two?" Bull nodded in the direction of Julian's friends, who had gotten off the motorcycle but were still giving the ATV a wide berth.

"Mildred and Timothy. We're volunteers."

"I figured. Why have you stopped Raskujan?"

"He's a thief!" Julian told him about the supply stand and the events of that morning.

"The kid's imagining things!" Raskujan cried. "What's wrong with getting water? We need to be able to leave Terrania. The desert's a big place. Where's the crime in that?"

"We'll see," Bull said simply.

He gave the soldiers a signal. Two of them stayed on the rocks while the others climbed down to the path and surrounded the ATV. A woman was among them. A European, mid-twenties maybe. When she noticed Julian's curious gaze, she turned her head away. But it didn't escape Julian's notice that her eyes were bloodshot, as if she'd been crying not long ago. Who was this woman? What was she doing with Bull?

The soldiers set about searching the ATV. Raskujan and his companions got out and watched events unfold with a look of defiance. The other man was burlier than Raskujan. His features were angular, making him look hard at first glance. There was a surprising warmth in his gaze, however. He took the petite Asian woman in his arms and whispered reassuringly into her ear. Julian

noticed that the little finger of his left hand was unusually short; the tip was missing, nail and all.

Mildred came over to Julian and took his hand. “Are you okay?”

He squeezed her hand. “Yeah, of course.”

She returned the pressure so hard that it hurt. “What do you mean, ‘of course’?! If you ever do anything like that again, I’ll shoot you personally, you hear me?”

The search took mere minutes. Alongside a first aid and tool box, it turned up provisions, a large travel bag, three sleeping bags, and mats, along with a backpack. The soldiers laid them all on the ground next to the vehicle.

“Care to do the honors?” said Bull.

Raskujan went to his knees and opened first the bag, then the backpack. He spread out the contents on the stony ground. A uniform appeared, similar to the one Raskujan was wearing. Russian flags were stitched onto the sleeves. More items of clothing, a toiletries kit, several tablets.

“Didn’t I tell you in the first place?” Raskujan said. “The kid’s imagining things!”

Julian felt his face flushing. “But that’s impossible! I saw it with my own eyes. His backpack was bulging! Something metallic had torn through the material and was sticking out!”

Raskujan picked up the backpack and turned it in all directions. “I don’t see any holes.”

“Then…” Julian considered. “Then you must have thrown the other backpack away!”

“Of course. In the desert. First we stole some oh-so-valuable Arkonide technology, and then we just threw it away. The kid is out of his mind!” Raskujan put his hands on his hips.

Bull stayed silent a moment, as if lost in thought. He cast a glance at the woman with the sad eyes, then nodded slowly. “You can go, Raskujan,” he said. “Sorry for keeping you. But even if you weren’t impressed by Terrania, I’m sure you understand that we’re not in a simple situation here. When we get a lead, we have to follow it up.” He gave the soldiers a signal. Two of them pushed Julian’s Bullet to the side so the ATV could pass.

Raskujan and his companions packed up their belongings and stowed them on the cargo bed again. Bull wished them a pleasant journey. Raskujan barked something that was lost among the

revving of the engine. Seconds later, the ATV had disappeared around the valley's next bend.

"That's..." Julian couldn't grasp it. "How... How could you let them get away? I swear, that Raskujan guy was lying!"

"Obviously," Bull replied. "But he still gave away everything we wanted to know." He clapped Julian on the shoulder. "Come on, let's go take a look at their loot!"

15.

July 26, 2036
Perry Rhodan

Rhodan crouched on the floor of the Arkonide starship and looked outside. His "window" was a jagged hole torn by the explosion of one of the spacedrives. The steel edges—if "steel" was accurate for the Arkonide material—were frayed, reminding Rhodan of strips of cloth. But they didn't waver in the airstream, instead standing against it defiantly. The air whistled brightly as it swept by, masking the roaring of the remaining spacedrives that carried their quarry to Terrania.

Two or three hundred meters below them, Central Asia raced past like a scurrying shadow. As an experienced test pilot, Rhodan estimated their speed as just under Mach 1.

"Am I disturbing you?"

Rhodan turned around. John Marshall, the telepath, had stepped up behind him. Rhodan hadn't heard him coming. How would he? The noise would have let half a platoon sneak up behind him unnoticed.

But Rhodan had nothing to fear on that front. De Soto was locked up in one of the ship's hangars along with his soldiers and specialists. Thora's mercilessness had broken his will.

"No, not at all." He rubbed a hand over his face. He'd removed the mask, which was now useless. The material had come off remarkably easily, but since then he'd been plagued by an annoying itch. His skin was inflamed; it would take time for it to calm down again.

Marshall, the former investment banker, sat cross-legged next to Rhodan. A position that didn't quite fit with Rhodan's image of a banker.

"Did you sleep?" Rhodan asked.

"As well as I could." The telepath shrugged. "After all that, I should have gone out like a light. But..."

“Too restless?”

“Yeah.”

“I can relate.”

Marshall looked at him inquiringly. “You’re not happy?”

“Did you read that in my thoughts?”

“No. I’m too exhausted for that. Even if I wanted to.” Marshall lifted up a water bottle he’d brought with him and raised it to his lips. It had come from de Soto’s inventory. The telepath’s features were sunken, resembling those of an old man. His gift pushed his body to its limits.

Marshall took the bottle from his lips again. “Besides, I don’t want to. Believe me, it’s a good thing that people keep secrets from one another.”

“I can imagine.”

The telepath put the bottle down in front of him. It stayed standing. Rhodan looked at it for a moment as if witnessing a miracle. He was, in a sense. This ship had to weigh thousands of tonnes, was thousands of years old, and heavily damaged. Nonetheless, it was riding on the jets of its remaining propulsion units. And doing it so smoothly that the bottle had a stable floor to stand on. This ship *was* a miracle. It was their hope. And it belonged to them now. But at what price?

“You might know this,” Marshall said, “but I only started to understand my gift pretty recently. It’s like a miracle.”

Rhodan looked up and started at the telepath. Had his choice of words been a coincidence? Or had he involuntarily picked up Rhodan’s thoughts and reworked them?

“A miracle that comes with great responsibility.” Marshall hadn’t noticed Rhodan’s gaze. The telepath was too preoccupied with his own thoughts. “My gift is a power that could so easily be abused. We experienced it with Clifford Monterny. It requires principles. I made it a rule to never read anyone’s thoughts against their will. Not unless it’s an emergency.”

“Like in our case,” Rhodan said.

“Like in our case,” Marshall confirmed.

A body of water, shining in the sunlight, came into view beneath them. It reached all the way to the horizon. It had to be Lake Baikal. Thora had decided to steer the ship over the Arctic to the North Pole, and from there proceed south over the sparsely inhabited expanse of Siberia. This was to avoid contact with

airplanes. So far, her plan had proven successful; their flight had remained undisturbed.

"You're a man of principle, aren't you, John?" Rhodan said. "Homer G. Adams told me about your home for street children."

Marshall, the investment banker, had transferred his saved up bonuses into a foundation a few years ago. With that, he'd transformed an old mansion in Houston into what he'd called the Pain Shelter.

"Have you found out what happened to the children?" Rhodan asked.

"No. Homer put his connections on the case, but with no luck. The shelter building is burned out."

"That doesn't have to mean anything. Without you, the kids were left to their own devices. An accident?"

"Maybe. Or Homeland Security carted them all away." There was a crackling sound as Marshall's grip on the plastic bottle tightened.

"I doubt that. What would Homeland Security do with a bunch of kids?"

"Since when does Homeland Security give a damn about common sense or decency?"

Rhodan didn't try to argue back. Marshall was right. The department believed itself above the law and morality. "You did what you thought was right," he said in an effort to comfort the telepath.

"Yeah. But I still feel guilty. No different than you." Marshall looked at him with his deeply sunken eyes. Red veinlets branched out across his eyeballs.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Landing the *Stardust* in the Gobi instead of Nevada Fields. Your refusal to put the Arkonide technology in the hands of a single nation. Your dedication to Crest, who very nearly let you suffocate to death on the Moon. Your proclamation of Terrania as a city for all of humanity... The list goes on. You did what you thought was right, didn't you?"

Rhodan nodded. "I had no other choices. Otherwise I'd have betrayed everything I believed in."

"With the result that about half of humanity thinks you're a traitor. To their nation. To their worldview, which you've smashed to pieces. To our species. That gnaws at you."

“Of course. I’m only human.”

“Don’t let yourself be deterred!” Marshall insisted.

“I’m trying not to, but it’s not easy. You know…” Rhodan ran his palm along the floor of the ship. “As long as I can remember, I’ve dreamed of flying to the stars. That’s why I became an astronaut.”

“You *did* fly to the stars.”

“To the Moon. Big deal. I dreamed of journeying to other worlds that are inhabited. Meeting aliens. In a real starship. Like this one.”

“This ship belongs to us now. Your dreams have come true.”

“Not the way I imagined them. We won this ship by threatening General de Soto with torture. That’s not right!”

The blue of Lake Baikal gave way to the brown, seemingly endless steppes of Mongolia. Terrania wasn’t much farther.

“Not us,” Marshall argued. “Thora did it. We couldn’t do anything to stop her.”

“She shouldn’t have done it.”

“If she hadn’t broken de Soto, we’d either be dead now or Homeland Security would be torturing us.” The telepath took a long gulp from the bottle. “I don’t condone what Thora did, but I don’t judge her for it. She’s not human. She’s not bound to our moral standards.”

“She’s on Earth!”

“She’s stranded among aliens. She’s afraid.”

Thora, afraid? Rhodan thought back on his past encounters with her. He’d never looked at the Arkonide from that angle before. Fear… That explained a lot. “You could be right about that, John.”

“We’ll find out. When her fear subsides, we’ll get to know the real Thora.” Marshall had emptied the bottle now. He carefully closed it and put it down next to him. “You have more than that on your mind, don’t you?”

“A lot more. Everything.” Rhodan lifted his shoulders, then let them slump down again. “John, we’re on the brink of a global civil war. There’s unrest and fighting everywhere.”

“That’s not your fault. You didn’t want that.”

“But I was the one who set the spark. You see?”

“Sure. But I believe we were in dire need of that spark.” Marshall ran a hand across his forehead, wiping away the beads of sweat. His body’s temperature regulation had gotten out of step. It

would take days before he got back to normal. “Did you know I was there in Nevada Fields during the *Stardust*’s launch?”

“No.” Why was the telepath changing the subject? “What brought you there?”

“Sid. He’s like you; he dreams about the stars. He kept pestering me until I got on a bus to Nevada with him and traveled over two thousand kilometers. For an event that I’d have *politely* described as unnecessary. That was when I saw you and your crewmates for the first time, as you were trudging across the launch complex. And do you know what went through my head when I saw you?”

“I’m not the telepath. You tell me!”

“What a waste! Of money and resources, of good men. How could it be, I asked myself, that highly intelligent men like you and Bull were running off into space while the Earth below your feet was going to hell?”

“That’s not exactly a compliment.” Where was Marshall going with this?

“That’s the polite version. And I owe you an apology. It’s been a little over a month since the launch, but to me it feels like a whole different era, one way back in the distant past. An endless amount of stuff has happened since then—and I’ve learned better. You weren’t the one in the wrong, Perry. I was.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself! Your shelter gave dozens of kids a shot in life. You—”

“That’s just it,” Marshall interrupted. “Dozens. That’s exactly my mistake. I was doing something, trying to make the world a better place. But I overlooked something in all my eagerness: it was like trying to drain the sea with a bucket. The Pain Shelter had space for thirty-one children. Thirty-one out of thousands of kids living on the street in Greater Houston alone. Thirty-one out of millions worldwide. What we need isn’t a few people giving welfare to a few other people. Prodding at the symptoms. We have to free ourselves from the chains we’ve put on ourselves. You, Perry, are giving us the chance to shake them off!”

The ship slowed down. It began to descend.

Rhodan felt his face reddening. “John, you…” He searched for the right words but couldn’t find them. He was about to start again when he was saved from his quandary in an unexpected way.

The air flickered in front of them. A holo appeared. Thora, in the ship’s command center, which was now free of soldiers.

“Perry, John, we’re nearly in Terrania. Get ready!”

Terrania rose up from the horizon before them. Thora turned the ship to give Rhodan and Marshall a clear view through the hole the explosion had torn in the hull. The wind tugged at the two men, but it couldn’t knock them over. The air was sizzling hot, warmed by the sun and further heated by the blazing jets of the spacedrives.

Terrania’s skyline was low. The city’s buildings were only a few stories high—with the exception of the Stardust Tower, which soared into the sky from the center of all the others, as if it were about to shake off Earth’s gravity and head for the stars. An oasis in the desert. A place of hope.

Tears welled up in Rhodan’s eyes. The hot airstream forced them out, along with a realization that dawned on him unexpectedly: Terrania was his home now.

“We are expected,” said Thora, who appeared to be standing next to the two men, but was actually farther inside the ship’s command center. The hologram was deceptively lifelike.

We. No “*You’re* expected, Rhodan!”

Just ahead of the city, Thora turned the craft and started to fly in long loops. The ship tilted to give a view of the ground. It was covered with people. They’d gathered between the city and the bank of the Juyan salt lake. They stood so close together that they looked like another sea that had miraculously formed in the desert. And it was growing—streams of people were still surging out of the city. They reminded Rhodan of tributaries flowing into a lake and becoming part of it.

The lake’s surface was smooth apart from a platform that rose up in the center. Rhodan could just about see a single person standing on the platform.

A space cleared in the center of the lake as the ship approached to descend: desert floor bleached by the sun. Soon there was an irregular circle of land with the platform at its edge. The Arkonide headed directly for that area. The ship quaked as Thora increased the thrust to counter the steel sphere’s speed. With a soft touch that would have drawn a reluctant grunt of respect even from the virtuoso Reginald Bull, she touched down. The spacedrives’ jets reached the ground, sweeping sand and loose debris to the side and rousing a storm to rival those the Gobi occasionally unleashed.

Thora cut the thrust. The propulsion units’ droning died out, and a silent vibration took its place. The ship had landed. The storm

roused by the propulsion units settled down, giving them a clear view of the desert again. The sea of people had withstood it unharmed; they hadn't yielded even one centimeter. In front of the two men, at the height of the rim bulge and about ten meters away from it, was the platform.

Rhodan recognized the man waiting for them: Bai Jun. The former Chinese general clapped the sand off his uniform, the same kind from which he, like Rhodan and tens of thousands of Chinese soldiers from his siege army, had removed his rank insignias and national flags.

"Your shining moment, Perry. What are you waiting for?"

Rhodan looked at the Arkonide. He heard no sarcasm in her comment. It astonished him. Had he already caught a glimpse of the "real Thora" Marshall had talked about?

"What are you talking about?" he replied. "It's *our* shining moment. We recaptured this ship together."

"I'm not a Terran." Thora didn't make eye contact. Her head was turned diagonally away; she looked preoccupied with the countless error reports from the ship's systems. "Besides, I'm needed here in the command center. The ship's auto-repair routines have started running. The machines work better with a living being to direct them."

It may well have been true, but wasn't there time for that later? He was about to try to change Thora's mind when Marshall put a hand on his arm. The telepath wordlessly shook his head. The Arkonide didn't want to.

"How do John and I get out?" Rhodan asked. They were almost forty meters above the ground.

"In style." Thora waved a hand. An invisible energy field grasped the two men and raised them into the air.

Marshall let out a yelp of surprise. Rhodan felt a tingling sensation; the hair on his skin stood on end as if surrounded by an electrostatic charge.

The two of them floated out of the ship and down to the platform. Silence covered the desert. The Arkonide ship looked like a marvel to the humans. A marvel the likes of which they'd hoped for from Terrania, and that had so far been absent.

"Welcome home!" Bai Jun offered first Rhodan, then Marshall his hand. The former general wore a band with the flag of Terrania on his upper arm: the milky way on a blue background.

Rhodan slowly turned on the spot and soaked in the panorama: the steel sphere resting on massive landing struts, the silhouette of Terrania, the endlessly wide horizon of the plain, the tens of thousands of people who had assembled.

"I have to be honest, I wasn't expecting this kind of reception."

"Why not? You're a hero, Rhodan. And heroes get a hero's welcome."

A hero? Rhodan thought back to the sight of Manhattan burning, to the broken General de Soto. "You're wrong. I'm no hero."

"I must disagree. You don't feel like a hero, but to these people, you are one. A symbol. And we need symbols."

"Like a battered Arkonide ship that can barely fly, for example?"

"For example. Did the operation go smoothly?"

"It wasn't *quite* as planned. President Drummond had replaced the general in charge with a friend. Without John, we'd have been scuppered before we began."

"I expected something along those lines." Bai Jun turned around and went to a box attached to the platform, opened it, and pulled out a bottle. "Here, John. Some water."

The telepath took the bottle and emptied it in one gulp. Then he asked, "Have you heard from Sid and Anne?"

"Yes. They're safe. They're currently with Allan Mercant in a private jet that left American territory two hours ago."

"That's great. Thanks!"

For a moment, the three men stood there in silence. It was still quiet around them, but Rhodan could just about hear a faint humming. It came from the Arkonide ship. The repair routines Thora had mentioned must have come online. Would they manage to make a fully functional ship out of this half-wreck? It seemed impossible to Rhodan. But so had taking over the supposed wreck when Thora had suggested it.

Now it belonged to them. A symbol to show that the dream of Terra wasn't a wild delusion, but a concrete, achievable goal. Concentrated power that would ensure no confused militaries or politicians would be suicidal enough to order a military strike on Terrania. A vehicle that would carry them to Venus, where there was an Arkonide base. A treasure trove of knowledge that would enable humanity to skip thousands of years of progress. One they

had only just uncovered.

Rhodan expected Bai Jun to lead him and Marshall down the steps that led to the ground, but the other man made no such move. Instead, he reached into the pocket of his uniform and pulled out a headset. “Here, so the people can hear you.”

“You want me to give a speech?”

“No. Personally, I’ve endured enough speeches over the years to last a lifetime. What we need is a symbolic act.” Bai Jun turned around and pulled a second bottle out of the box. It was green and made of glass.

“A 2003 Perrier-Jouët from the stocks of one of my superior officers. He couldn’t bring himself to recognize the sign of the times, so he hightailed it to Beijing to join the fray that will decide the general secretary’s successor. He was kind enough to leave his personal effects behind for us.” Bai Jun held out the bottle to Rhodan.

“You want me to...” Rhodan turned his head in the direction of the steel sphere.

“Christen the ship? Exactly. It’s humanity’s first ever starship. It obviously needs a name.”

Rhodan took the bottle. “No doubt you’ve already thought of one, Bai Jun. You think of everything.”

“Thank you for the compliment. But I’m just a former military officer with no imagination. Vision is your business.”

Rhodan weighed the bottle in his hand. He looked up, and gazed around searchingly.

“There wasn’t enough time for a boom with a rope,” Bai Jun explained. “I think a well-aimed throw would do just as well.”

Rhodan put the headset into his ear and breathed gently. The sound was transmitted through speakers on the platform’s scaffold. The people would hear his every word. He walked to the edge of the platform and grabbed the neck of the bottle with his right hand. Then he took a swing and threw. In a high arc, the bottle flew towards the ship and smashed against the upper edge of the rim bulge. White foam spread out, washing the soot away.

“I hereby christen this ship with the name *Good Hope*,” said Rhodan.

At first he was met with silence, then cheering rose up. It started hesitantly, as if the people didn’t trust their instinct, but then it grew louder and louder.

In the hole in the *Good Hope*'s hull, something moved. Thora. She floated out of the ship and towards the platform.

Rhodan switched off the headset. "Thora!" he called. "I'm so happy you joined us here after..." Rhodan trailed off when he noticed the Arkonide was shaking.

The energy field placed her down directly in front of him. There were tears in her eyes.

"Thora, what's happened?"

"I... I... The hypercom unit is repaired. We..." She looked up, fixing Rhodan with her gaze. "We can't stay on this world!"

16.

July 26, 2036
Reginald Bull

Bull operated the helicopter with one hand. It was a WZ-12 from the Chinese People's Liberation Army, a model with formidable stealth features whose existence was firmly denied by all official sources. General Bai Jun had brought a handful of attack helicopters over to Rhodan's side when he defected.

Bull, being a techhead, had dove right into them as soon as he had a free moment. With the Chinese mechanics' aid, he'd literally taken one apart and put it back together again—and he had disarmed them all, without exception. The Arkonides' arrival had made all human technology obsolete overnight. Nonetheless, the combat helicopters remained deadly tools. It would have been foolish to ignore them.

Reginald Bull pushed off. The WZ-12 jerked into the sky. The heavy copter that had transported the soldiers remained on the ground below; the last Bull saw of them were two dust clouds as they drove the Bullets over to carry them back.

"Mr. Bull?" A throat-clearing cough. "Sir?"

It was Julian Tifflor, who had stood in the thieves' way. Unarmed. "Insane," Raskujan had called him. It had been meant as an insult, but Bull had taken it the exact opposite way. He had a weakness for crazy people. Especially ones with plenty of balls.

"Reginald to my friends." He shook his head in playful reproach. "Or just Reg, Julian."

The young man—Bull guessed early twenties—audibly gulped, but quickly pulled himself together. "Tiff. My friends call me Tiff." He gestured towards the desert two hundred meters below. Bull had picked up speed and was flying in ever-growing circles as he waited for Michalovna's instructions. But the young man couldn't know that. "Where are we going?"

"The thieves' hiding place."

“I knew it!” Julian pounded a fist against his thigh. “But...how do you know, I mean, *do* you know where it is? Did the soldiers find some clue in their luggage? Or was there a drone filming their escape?”

“Nope. It’s way simpler and way more complicated. Miss Michalovna”—he looked at the telepath, who sat in the copilot’s seat—“I mean, *Tatiana*, can explain.”

It was a gesture, and one she understood right away. Her eyes widened in surprise, and suddenly an expression showed in her eyes that he’d never seen in her before: gratitude. Bull had won the mutant over.

“Certainly, Reg,” she said, turning to Julian. “I possess an extraordinary gift. I am a telepath.”

“What? You can read thoughts?” Mildred had asked the question. The young woman was sitting next to Julian. She had long, black hair, and Bull saw an unusual combination in her features: warmth *and* hardness. The trio’s last member, Timothy Harnahan, had withdrawn to the very back of the cabin. The lanky young man with the braid was playing about with his tablet. He looked like he’d forgotten the world around him. Timothy was the one who had sent the distress call that had put Bull on the thieves’ trail.

“That’s right,” Michalovna replied.

“But how?”

“To be honest, I don’t know. I just can.”

“But—”

Julian poked Mildred in the side. Lovingly, but emphatically. “And that’s how you knew what the guy was called, Reg?” he asked. “Tatiana told you?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t need her to. I’d have recognized him anyway. Stepan Raskujan was a cosmonaut... Until recently, the superstar of the Great Russian space program. He started out as an officer, but during the border wars in the Caucasus, he worked his way up to being the hero of Great Russia. Then someone in the Kremlin came up with the idea of sending the hero into space.”

Bull paused a moment and thought back to the first time he’d met Raskujan. It was at a coordination meeting between representatives of NASA and the Great Russian space agency, Roscosmos. They were exploring the idea of a joint manned mission to Venus. Raskujan had only just been made into a cosmonaut,

putting him below the other attendees in both rank and experience. Despite that, he had dominated the meeting. The thin, pale man had something aristocratic about him. Raskujan believed himself destined for greatness. Bull, a laborer's son, had found him repugnant from the word go.

The pilot shrugged his shoulders and shook off the memories. Aloud, he said, "But that's all in the past. The heroes of yesterday are the discarded rags of today."

"And the other two?"

"The front-seat passenger was Artyom Tomisenkov," the telepath replied. "Also a cosmonaut. Or rather, an ex-cosmonaut."

"Another former war hero?"

"No. Tomisenkov was a swimmer, a multiple Olympic medalist. Until the Kremlin made him into a cosmonaut."

"Two heroes turning to common theft," Mildred interjected. "What are they thinking?"

"I can tell you that. They're resentful. Raskujan and Tomisenkov were heroes—until the *Stardust* landed in the Gobi a month ago with Crest on board. Now Great Russia is on the verge of falling apart, and its proud space program has turned out to be a bad joke."

"They can be glad their beloved Great Russia didn't send them to the Moon," Bull snorted. "Otherwise they'd be dead by now!"

"Probably, but that's not how they see it."

"What about the woman?" Julian asked. "She's not a cosmonaut, right?"

"No." Michalovna hesitated. "At least, I don't think so. Her name's Ishy Matsu, and she's Japanese. I couldn't read anything else from her. That's unusual. I'd almost think she was..."

An image appeared on the windshield. Bai Jun, semitransparent and pale as a ghost, transmitting from the Stardust Tower's roof.

"Bull?"

"What's up, Bai Jun?"

"Perry Rhodan is on his way back."

Bull felt some of the tension abruptly going out of him. Perry had done it! The Arkonide ship was theirs!

"Did it all go according to plan?" he asked.

"Seemingly not. But Rhodan, Thora, and Marshall evidently managed to subdue the American soldiers on board. As for how, I'm excited to find out." The former general looked at the time.

“Rhodan will arrive in a few minutes. I’m having a hero’s welcome readied for him. What’s your situation?”

“We’re pretty much on the way back. Tatiana read the thoughts of Rico’s thieves. They hid the robot in the desert. We’ll pick him up and be back in time for your grand welcome.”

“Fantastic.” If Bai Jun was surprised by Bull’s familiar form of address for the telepath, he didn’t show it. He glanced at one of the many displays around him. “My people have turned something up, by the way. A volunteer who was working in the clinic hasn’t been seen since this morning. A Japanese woman called Ishy Matsu.”

“She’s one of the thieves, along with two Russian cosmonauts. How did they pull it off?”

“Honestly? We don’t have the slightest idea. The clinic has far too many—”

“I know!” Michalovna interrupted. “I couldn’t read her thoughts. She must be a mutant!”

Bai Jun stroked his chin. “That would explain a few things. What sort of a gift does she have?”

“That I can’t tell you. I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll find out as soon as our soldiers bring the thieves to Terrania.”

“No luck there, I’m afraid,” Bull commented. “I let the three of them go.”

“You did what?” Bai Jun stiffened. “Why did you do that, Bull? They’re thieves. They deserve punishment. And this Japanese woman... If she really is a mutant, she’s immeasurably valuable to us!”

“Maybe. But she’s not a tool. She’s a person. If she’s going to come over to our side, it has to be of her own free will.”

“But just think what—”

“I think it’s impossible to force someone to be happy, even with the best of intentions. We can’t forget that. Unless you want our brave new world to be an oppressive one.”

Bai Jun stated at Bull, his features frozen into a mask. Then he drew a deep breath and said, “You’re right, Bull.”

“Now and again. But mainly, I’ve learned a few new things. Not least of all from you.”

“It’s not far from here!” Michalovna cried. The telepath had closed her eyes and was concentrating on the images she had found in the former cosmonauts’ minds. Small beads of sweat had formed

on her forehead.

"See you soon, Bai Jun!"

Bull cut the connection. He made the WZ-12 circle. They'd reached the end of the valley, where the sandy plain began. Terrania's skyline stood on the horizon. In the shimmering noon heat, the city looked like a mirage.

"They hid Rico under a rock," the telepath said.

"I'd have guessed." Below them was a sea of rocks. There had to be literally thousands of little hidey holes.

"I can see it plain as day in my mind." Michalovna opened her eyes, and looked at the ground as Bull kept the aircraft circling. "But not with my eyes!" she added, angry. The beads of sweat had trickled together. Sweat ran into her eyes, reddening them again. "The landscape looks totally different from above!"

"I'll go lower." Bull lowered the WZ-12. He found the road and slowly followed it along the valley at a height of a few meters.

Michalovna bent over, her hands gripping the seat's arms. "It's...it's no use," she said. "It looks too different."

Bull nodded. "No worries, we'll get there. We can land and walk along by foot. It'll take a while, but we—"

"I know how we can do it!" Timothy Harnahan had stepped between the pilot and copilot's seats, his friends willingly making space for him to get through.

"Are you the expert on telepathy, or what?" Bull eyed the lanky young man with skepticism.

"No, but look!" He held his tablet between Bull and Michalovna. "I took the liberty of saving the video data recorded by the pod attached to Mildred's handlebars. I have the data on my tablet, all tagged."

"Sure. And that means?"

"See for yourself!" The road and the valley appeared on the windshield, as shot by Timothy's camera. "That's the same perspective the thieves had. Maybe Tatiana can match up my recording with what she saw in the cosmonauts' minds?"

Bull looked at the telepath inquiringly. She nodded. "It's worth a try."

Timothy led the recording run. Twice within a short time, the telepath paused it; twice she discarded that location. Finally, she called a third time, "Stop!"

Timothy stopped the recording.

“There, on the right!” Michalovna bent over and tapped on a slab of rock sitting at an angle, its tip resting diagonally against another rock that stood a meter high. “It has to be in the crevice here!”

Timothy’s fingers scurried over the tablet. The camera recording disappeared, replaced with a coordinate display. Bull steered towards that location. It was in the lower third of the valley. There was a large enough empty space next to the road to land the helicopter. He switched off the turbines. While the rotor blades were still running down, they left the vehicle and hurried to the rock crevice.

Julian kept pace with Bull. “Reg, what did the thieves actually steal? Bai Jun said something about a robot. And ‘Rico,’ was it?”

“You heard correctly. I’ll tell you as soon as we’ve found him, okay?”

“Sure thing!”

Bull realized he’d started to run. *Why?* He asked himself. *It doesn’t matter if we get there a few seconds earlier or later. No one’s going to steal those charred remains out from under us.*

Tatiana caught up to him and took the lead. “There!” she cried. “I see it!” She accelerated to a speed Bull didn’t expect from the small-framed Russian woman. He kept up with her, but it took some effort. She crossed the wide road. Beyond it, the ground was covered in rocks; the telepath started zigzagging without dropping her speed at all.

She made it to the slab resting diagonally. It formed a narrow crevice reaching to waist height. In the glaring midday sun, the shadow beneath it looked pitch black. Bull went to his knees to pull the backpack containing Rico out of the crevice.

It was empty.

“This can’t…”

He had to be mistaken. He got down on all fours and crawled under the rock. Nothing was there. The crevice was completely empty.

He crawled out again. Expectant gazes were waiting for him. Julian, his friends, and telepath had formed a semicircle.

“Nothing. There’s nothing there.” Bull stood up. “You must have gotten confused, Tatiana.”

She shook her head. “No, this is the place. I have a clear picture in my head of Raskujan bringing the backpack here.” She turned

around. “They came past here. Tomisenkov stopped the ATV a little farther along. Then Raskujan looked for a spot that wasn’t visible from the road.”

“There’s a boot print in the sand!” Julian had run a few meters in the direction the telepath had suggested. “It isn’t from any of us!”

“Then we’re in the right place,” Bull concluded. “The chances of just *happening* to find a person’s tracks in this empty wasteland is practically zero. But then where’s Rico?”

“There are some more tracks here! From an animal!” Julian cried.

“What’s an animal going to do with a robot?”

“Maybe it belonged to a nomad? The Gobi does have indigenous inhabitants. Maybe one of them saw Raskujan hiding the backpack and took it after the ATV drove on?”

Bull looked across the desert. Right to the horizon, where Terrania rose up, there wasn’t a single human soul to see. Not one vehicle, house, or other man-made structure. Julian’s explanation was a possible one, but Bull didn’t believe it. It was too implausible. He…

His pod buzzed. Bull pulled it out of his pocket and activated it. Perry Rhodan’s face appeared on the screen.

“Perry!” he cried. “You did it! How did you—” He stopped short when he noticed the sober look on his friend’s face. “What’s wrong? Did you lose the ship at the last moment?”

“No. But I have to ask you to get back to Terrania as quickly as possible. I need you!”

17.

July 27, 2036
Perry Rhodan

Rhodan listened to the voice.

The recording was clear. If he'd closed his eyes, he would have believed the speaker was standing right in front of him.

A mere illusion. A distance so immense that it exceeded the bounds of human imagination separated him from the speaker. The speaker was not a human. He spoke Arkonide, a language that was a mystery to humans. However, what the voice was expressing was no mystery to Rhodan. The hoarseness, and the stressed hard plosive, told of a desperation that moved Rhodan.

He played the recording again, trying to picture the speaker. Once the last sounds had faded, a voice behind him said softly, "Lizards have found us. They will overrun the system! Darkness is driving out the light! You live longer than the sun, it is said. Hurry! Kerlon."

The voice belonged to a woman. She spoke English, translating the distress call. With a flawlessness that would have suited a newscaster.

But this woman was not a human.

Rhodan stopped the playback with a nod towards the glowing horseshoe and turned around. Thora da Zoltral had left her seat in the middle of the *Good Hope*'s command center. "You're worried?" the Arkonide asked. She had regained her composure; she was distanced and under control now. But Rhodan had learned that this was a mask, and the real Thora was quite different.

"I'm thinking, let's say."

"Will you share your thoughts with me? I'm no mind reader, and my knowledge of human facial expressions isn't detailed enough to guess yet." Thora was wearing a decommissioned Chinese army uniform. The rank insignias had been removed, but none were needed; her bearing showed that she was the one in

charge on the Arkonide starship.

"They're all the obvious thoughts," Rhodan replied. "For example, who are these lizards? Who is this Kerlon who sent the distress call? And who was it directed at? Who does he want to hurry to him?"

The other questions, Rhodan kept to himself. How was it possible that the Arkonide's apprehension had changed to stout resolve in less than twenty-four hours? A resolve that (Rhodan sensed) came not from acceptance of having to face a tough situation, but from an inexplicable excitement. As if Thora hoped to find redemption in this voyage. Did she believe a door had opened that would let her return to Arkon?

"Those are important questions, I'll grant you." Thora folded her arms in a gesture she must have unwittingly acquired from humans. "But what's clear is that Arkonide lives are on the line. We could speculate until the end of our days, but we'll only find the answers at the origin of this distress call: the solar system of the star you humans call Vega."

"Hopefully."

"Why hopefully?"

"The distress call was sent in a code from the Great Imperium fleet. A code that's thousands of years old."

"That's true." His objection shook the Arkonide's self-assurance. "But we should—"

"...consider what that means," a voice interjected, cutting her off. It belonged to Reginald Bull. Rhodan's friend appeared between him and Thora as suddenly as if a teleporter had brought him into the *Good Hope*'s command center. However, Bull was actually at the top of the Stardust Tower. This was a two-dimensional image transmitted via com thanks to a makeshift fusion of human and Arkonide technology.

"In all likelihood, the distress call itself is thousands of years old," Bull continued. "Whoever this Kerlon is, he died a long time ago."

"Is that so?" Sheer fury sparked in Thora's eyes as she stared at Bull. His down-to-earth informality and her Arkonide status consciousness were like two chemical elements that reacted violently on contact. "And how, Mr. Bull, do you explain that we received the message only one day ago by your time scale?"

Bull shrugged. "What do I know? A hyperphysical

phenomenon? You're the expert here, aren't you?"

Tears of strong emotion welled up in Thora's eyes. She balled her hands into fists—but decided against a confrontation. "We launch in five minutes," she said frostily. "Make it brief!" She turned around and went back to the commander's seat.

The two friends looked at each other wordlessly.

"What is it, Reg?" Rhodan asked, finally interrupting the silence. "One last attempt at changing my mind?"

Bull gave a conciliatory smirk. They were good at arguing, but every bit as good at making up. "Of course. What did you expect?" He stroked his chin; red stubbled showed that he again hadn't gotten around to shaving that morning. "Perry, at the risk of sounding like the warning on a pack of cigarettes, I consider it my duty as a friend to remind you one last time: flying a millennium-old pile of alien scrap metal to a distant star to answer a strange distress call can be hazardous to your health...and the health of those around you!"

"I know." Rhodan couldn't hold back a chuckle. No one could hold a candle to Bull's skill at expressing his misgivings in a disarming manner.

"Just what a chain smoker says before lighting up the next one!" Bull replied. "Perry, this flight is crazy, and you know it."

"It would have been crazy *not* to do it. We have to think in new dimensions now. Twenty-seven light years is nothing. That's our front yard. We have to know what's happening in the Vega system. Thora and Crest are right in that regard."

"Really? What does it matter to us if locusts invade the yard?" Bull shook his head. His face had flushed. The two scars he'd earned during the *Stardust*'s crash landing in the Gobi stood out, pale. "We have to make sure everything doesn't fall apart here on Earth!"

"We have to make sure there's still an Earth *to* fall apart," Rhodan countered. "The Arkonides are only the tip of the iceberg. Out there, among the stars, it's teeming with life. Intelligent life. Dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of species have mastered space travel on a level similar to the Arkonides—and have a military potential that would allow them to turn Earth to ash at the press of a button!"

"And?" Bull shrugged. "Instead of a planet, all they'd get is a pile of ash running through their fingers. Wouldn't make such sense if you ask me.

"Me neither. But look around at what's happening on Earth. What's happened to you and me since we landed the *Stardust* in the Gobi. Does *that* make sense?"

"Not a whole lot of it."

"Exactly. But it happened. Because we humans are fallible and weak, driven by fear and longing that we can't explain ourselves. Like the Arkonides. And like all other life forms out there, I'm comfortable assuming."

"Maybe. But what do you plan to do about it?" Bull raised his hands imploringly. "The *Good Hope* is an auxiliary craft! Whatever's going on in the Vega system, you won't be able to stop it!"

"Reg," Rhodan said entreatingly, "I know that. And I understand that this trip puts a bad taste in your mouth. But we still have to do it. It's a recon flight, nothing more. We fly to Vega, see what's going on, and come back. That's all. We'll be back in twenty-four hours at most."

"So you say!" Bull ran a hand through his red crew cut. "Okay, fine. I give up. I know I can't stop you. Just promise me one thing. Don't start anything stupid, okay?"

Rhodan looked at his friend, the true comrade who had always been there for every stupid thing he'd started, and picked up what was going on inside him.

"Hand on your heart, Reg! You wish you were coming with, don't you?"

"Bullshit!" It came too quickly and too loudly. "Can you imagine anyone better suited to staying behind and holding the fort than me?"

"I'm sure you won't get bored," Rhodan reassured him.

"So am I!" Bull bent down towards the camera. "Perry, take care of yourself, okay? At a conservative estimate, we have about one to two billion people here who would like nothing more than for you to vanish from the face of the Earth without a trace and get back their tranquil little world that was on the brink of going to hell anyway. But there's a sentimental ex-astronaut here who had his ship shot out from under him that would miss you, all right?"

"I know. I'll see you tomorrow, Reg!"

Bull disappeared as he cut the connection, giving a full view of the *Good Hope*'s command center again. It was a circular room about ten meters across with a domed ceiling. In the middle stood Thora. Glowing virtual control panels surrounded her at waist

height. The argument appeared to be forgotten. In that sense, she had more in common with Bull than she'd ever have admitted. Her anger was like a burst of flame: hot and destructive but short-lived.

The Arkonide operated the control panels with nimble, self-assured motions. Rhodan was reminded of a conductor, with he and the remaining crew as her orchestra.

Holographic control panels flashed up in front of him. Only a few, with a fraction of the complexity that Thora made look like child's play. Training wheels. Thora was the only one among them who knew what she was doing on the ship. Rhodan was keenly aware that if she was put out of action, he and his crewmates would be stranded impossibly far from home. Just one more risk factor for the list, he consoled himself.

He cast a glance across the command center, looking at the faces of the others who had dared make this maiden voyage with him. Humanity's first trip to another star system. There were eight, four of them former astronauts like him.

Rod Nyssen, wiry, almost gaunt. A marathon runner who had burned off every last gram of fat from his body over the years. He looked jittery. It didn't faze Rhodan. He knew the reason: Rod Nyssen smoked. He was already missing his cigarettes.

Conrad Deringhouse, a tall, lanky man who looked like an overgrown kid. And he was too. Deringhouse approached risks with the carefree abandon of a child who had no concept of consequences.

Darya Morozova. The former Great Russian cosmonaut was quiet and unassuming. But she had an alert mind and extraordinary perception. Morozova always saw behind the facade.

Finally, Alexander Baturin. An intellectual you wouldn't have known had been the toughest cosmonaut in the Great Russian space program.

For Rhodan and his fellow astronauts, setting out on the *Good Hope* fulfilled a longing they had only just learned was not an impossible dream. The remaining four crew members were mutants.

Ras Tschubai. The Sudanese man was dark-skinned, athletic, and imperturbable. Rhodan and Bull owed him their lives. Tschubai, a teleporter, had rescued them from a small Australian town whose residents had wanted to lynch them.

Tako Kakuta. The slight Japanese man's parents had died due to late complications of radioactive contamination caused by the

Fukushima disaster. The orphan, a teleporter, was tracked down by Clifford Monterny. Monterny had no doubt saved Kakuta's life, but the guilt of having served a criminal weighed heavy on the man. Rhodan hoped he'd be able to shake it off when they were far away from Earth.

Anne Sloane. Her telekinetic gift had made her an expert surfer. Sloane was sporty and wiry and presented an exuberant front. But Rhodan sensed that there was a second Anne Sloane hidden behind that mask—perhaps the real one. Anne wasn't looking at the controls; her gaze was fixed on Rod Nyssen. Rhodan tried in vain to interpret it. He hoped there wasn't any conflict between them. Even if their mission would only be brief, they still needed to work together.

The fourth mutant was Wuriu Sengu, a victim of the Fukushima catastrophe like Kakuta. The heavyset young man, who looked like a rapper from the early twenty-first century, had a gift dubbed "scanning." Sengu could see through solid matter as if it weren't even there.

Thora commenced the launch. The *Good Hope*'s spacedrives roared to life, making the whole ship vibrate. Three of the drives were still gone; in less than twenty-four hours, the ship's auto-repair routines had worked miracles under the Arkonide's guidance—almost. The drives that were melted and torn to pieces couldn't be replaced, and instead, the ship had closed up the holes in the hull. To Rhodan, it had looked like they'd healed up, as if the ship were a living creature. Thora had assured him that the patched-up hull would be able to withstand the strain of the voyage.

A holo appeared along the wall. It depicted the launch site and its surroundings, as if they were looking through a window wrapping around the entire command center.

The *Good Hope* lifted off from the ground. Rhodan didn't feel the launch; he only saw it on the holo. The inertial dampers, which neutralized all forces of acceleration and braking, were working again. That had been the prerequisite for their flight; without inertial dampers, the g-force from the spacedrives would have crushed the crew.

Meter by meter, the *Good Hope* rose into the sky over Terrania. Thora used only a fraction of the spacedrives' potential; she wanted to give the mass of onlookers a show.

Rhodan had announced the *Good Hope*'s launch. Officially, the

ship was flying to Venus, to the Arkonide base Thora had discovered by coincidence. A second holo appeared over their heads as the *Good Hope* broke through the atmosphere. It showed the expanse of space ahead of them. Within minutes, the ship reached the Moon.

Rhodan's gaze lingered on the pale, cratered ball. Was it a coincidence that they had passed so close to Earth's satellite? Oh was it a barb from Thora, a casual demonstration of Arkonide superiority? The *Stardust* had taken three days to cover the same distance.

He tore his eyes away from the dead world where he and his crewmates had narrowly avoided losing their lives, and looked at Thora. He tried to read the Arkonide's countenance. She was focused and expressionless, immersed in her task of controlling the ship.

Thora set a course that would take them at a right angle from the solar system's ecliptic and increased the thrust. Within half a second, the *Good Hope* had accelerated to just below the speed of light, or three hundred thousand kilometers per second. Unimaginably fast, and yet hopelessly insufficient. The light from Vega took twenty-seven years to reach Earth.

They had only twenty-four hours.

The *Good Hope* would cross the unimaginable distance in an instant. With a jump through so-called "hyperspace," which was associated with the fifth dimension. It sounded like something out of the science fiction stories Rhodan had grown up with. Now it was a reality.

"Prepare for transition!" Thora said loudly.

She sank onto a formchair; the glowing control panels followed her movement, realigning themselves around her. Rhodan and the rest of the crew followed her example. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a mouth guard, and put it into his mouth. Haggard, the rugby player, had equipped the *Good Hope*'s crew with them. Not without a grinning admonishment that Rhodan *had* to come back soon. The Terran League's first game was coming up; they needed the equipment.

"Thirty seconds!" said Thora.

Rhodan thought of Bull. He'd rather have had his friend with him, but that was impossible. He and Bull had become symbols for the new era that had dawned on Earth. One of them had to stay

behind.

"Twenty seconds!"

What would await them near Vega? Crest and Thora didn't know the system, nor did the few Arkonide Positronics they still had. They knew for sure that Vega had planets. Astronomers on Earth had confirmed it a few years ago. There was a huge gas giant reminiscent of Jupiter. A ringed planet reminiscent of Saturn. Did the Vega system also have planets similar to Earth?

"Ten seconds!"

Not Earth, maybe. But there had to be life there. Still. Rhodan thought of the distress call again. "Lizards have found us. They will overrun the system! Darkness is driving out the light! You live longer than the sun, it is said. Hurry! Kerlon."

"Jump!" cried Thora.

The stars glittering in the holo above Rhodan sharply expanded, becoming a cascade of pale white. White was abruptly replaced with black, an endless abyss.

It engulfed Perry Rhodan.

18.

July 28, 2036
Reginald Bull

A muffled knocking jolted Bull out of his sleep. It sounded as if someone were hitting his apartment door with a rubber mallet.

"Reg, come quick!" called a voice from beyond the door.

Bull looked at the time. A little before seven. Was this his life now?

"No chance!" he called back. "Not unless the world is ending!"

He was met with stunned silence. Then: "Reg, it's Perry! He's coming back!"

A fluid motion—he could thank his astronaut training for his nimbleness—took Bull out of bed and over to the door. It slid back to reveal a girl, a fragile child whose left arm ended in a stump. It was Sue, a street child John Marshall had given a home to at his shelter in Houston, and who had shown herself to have an extraordinary gift like Marshall's.

"Perry's back? Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

He turned and looked at himself in the mirror. He was still in the decommissioned Chinese uniform he'd fallen into bed wearing late last night. It looked just as creased and wrinkled as his own face. Red stubble grew over the furrows of his chin, coming close to joining up with the stubble of his head hair. The two freshly healed wounds on his face stood out. Bull twisted his mouth into a grin. The scars swelled up, lending him a sinister air. For a moment, he looked at himself with satisfaction. As a kid, no one had taken the fat boy seriously. He'd always wished he could give a frightening enough scowl that people would at least be afraid of him. That wish seemed to have finally come true.

"Rehearsing for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*?" Sue asked snidely, showing her unbelievable cultural knowledge. She should have been far too young to know about ancient movies like that. Even Bull, who had a soft spot for bad entertainment from decades

past, had only stumbled upon *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* shortly before the *Stardust* had launched.

He had to laugh. “You got me pegged.”

“That’s not exactly hard.” Sue reciprocated his laughter. “Come on! The others are already up top!”

They jumped into the central shaft. Earth’s gravity fell away from them. Bull took hold of a rope and pushed off, heading upwards. Sue kept pace, making up for her missing hand with precision. Bull switched between ropes as his own momentum carried him upwards in diagonal spurts. Sue worked her way up the shaft in a straight line.

“Has the *Good Hope* landed already?” Bull asked.

Sue shook her head. “No. But Bai Jun has it on your...your...”

“Scanner,” he said, helping her out.

“On your scanner. He said it’s unmistakable.”

As unmistakable as it could be. The scanner was an Arkonide device. It had survived both the *Aetron*’s destruction on the Moon and the *Stardust*’s crash landing. Thora had identified the charred, bedraggled lump as the collision warning system for an auxiliary craft. Bull had handed it over to a team of engineers, telling them he wanted to know what the hell was going on in their solar system. Within a week, they’d pulled off the feat of combining the scanner with Earth technology and making it cough up halfway usable results.

They reached the roof in record time. Bull pushed off, slid out of the anti-grav field, and landed on his feet as gravity took hold of him again. Nearly three dozen people had assembled on the roof of the Stardust Tower. Rhodan and Bull’s closest circle.

Lesly Pounder, the former flight director of NASA and the man who had sent the *Stardust* to the Moon, was bent over a screen. Half a dozen men and women surrounded him. Bull knew them from Nevada Fields. They were former NASA employees who had switched to Rhodan’s side, like Pounder.

A second group had formed around John Marshall. Tatiana Michalovna was among them, as were Sid González and Allan Mercant. A third group was clustered around Bai Jun. It was made up of former officers from the siege army. Crest stood apart from the others.

Bai Jun turned around when he heard Bull’s arrival. “Ah, Mr. Bull,” he said, “I see you dressed for the occasion.” The former

general, a stickler for formality, looked Bull up and down critically.

"I wasn't expecting them back until this afternoon. If you give Perry any rope, he usually uses up every last inch of it." And beyond, a lot of the time. Like on the Moon. Bull had no doubt that he and his crewmates would all have suffocated on the Moon if Perry hadn't ignored all directives. He stepped over to Bai Jun. "Where is he?"

"About the height of Mars's orbit."

The former general called him over to one of the displays. There wasn't much to see. A symbolic representation of the solar system. Thin outlines marked the planets' orbits, and circles of different sizes the planets themselves. A flickering green dot was moving towards the Earth, drawing a curved line behind it.

"The *Good Hope* appeared seven minutes ago." Bai Jun swiped across the screen. The image refreshed; the green was gone, but it then appeared farther out, beyond Jupiter's orbit. It paused before finally starting towards Earth. "A time-lapse of the approach," Bai Jun explained. "The ship pulled out of hyperspace at near light speed—as Crest da Zoltral phrased it—and then braked sharply." He swiped across the display again. The original view returned. Now, only a finger's width separated the green dot from Earth.

The *Good Hope* was almost back. Bull felt a weight lifting from him. The ramshackle ship had survived the flight to Vega and back. What would Rhodan and the crew have found there? Excited voices all around were outdoing each other in their speculation about the distress call.

Bull listened to them, and to the voice inside himself...and felt an unease that he couldn't explain. He looked around. Even Lesly Pounder, who'd rather have bitten his own tongue off than show any joy, was holding an animated conversation.

But Crest... He had tears in his eyes. What was wrong? Did he see something that Bull and the others had overlooked? Bull tried to make eye contact, but the elderly Arkonide turned his head away. He staggered, supporting himself on his cane. He had to be worried about Thora. She was like a daughter to him, and it must have been immensely difficult to let her fly off on the *Good Hope*. That was surely the reason. Bull was seeing ghosts.

"The *Good Hope* is almost here," Bai Jun said. "I'll notify the people via TerraNet. They should have the chance to come to the landing site and—"

“No!” a cry interrupted. It came from Crest. The Arkonide had come closer. “Please, Bai Jun, don’t do that,” he added. Softly, as was always his way.

“Why not? This is a historic moment.”

“Because...” The Arkonide shook his head reluctantly, as if struggling internally against what he had to say. “Please, wait for now. It’s better that way.”

Bai Jun scrutinized Crest. Then he said, “As you wish.”

“There it is!” Sue cried in a high tone. She raised her good arm and pointed high into the sky.

Above them, a second sun blazed up, an incandescent point that rapidly grew as the ship fell towards Terrania on its spacedrive jets. Cheering broke out on the roof, soon drowned out as the ship’s roaring propulsion units approached the city.

This was unnecessary, but Thora clearly wanted to make the landing into a show just as spectacular as the launch had been. If she was the one steering it.

As Bull watched the glowing ball’s course, spellbound, his thoughts went back to the time-lapse Bai Jun had shown him. After coming out of hyperspace, the green dot had paused for a few minutes—to get its bearing, no doubt—and then set a course for Earth.

Bull suddenly understood his unease. Why the need to get their bearings? Thora knew her destination exactly. So what was going on?

The spacedrives shut off. The glowing faded to reveal a clear view of the ship.

Sue was the first one to find any words. “That... That’s not the *Good Hope*!”

The *Good Hope* was a sphere, but this ship was more like—Bull searched in his mind for an accurate analogy—a spindle. A giant spindle. With a few moments’ delay, the spacedrives’ thundering died down too. In perfect, surreal-looking silence, the spindle ship sank towards the ground. It descended to the city, to the site where the *Good Hope* had set out for Vega. The platform Bai Jun had used to greet Rhodan and Marshall was still standing. It gave them a frame of reference for scale.

The spindle ship was five times the size of the *Good Hope*.

Landing struts extended from it and sank into the desert with a crunch. Then there was silence again.

This time Bull was the one to break it. “Looks like we have visitors,” he said quietly.

19.

July 28, 2036
The Alien

From a hill near Terrania, she watched the ship's descent. A disused trench gave them visual cover. They didn't need more than that. A casual observer would have had no reason to mistrust her apparent humanity.

The thundering ceased as the impulse drives went offline. Carried by the anti-grav projectors, the ship silently glided to the ground. For the humans, the ship's arrival was no doubt a surprise, even a shock. Not for her. Her reconnaissance ship's Positronic had given her advance notice. Her own craft was hidden in a secure location until she needed it, but she kept in contact with it via an encrypted com link.

The recon vessel was spaceworthy; it was an autonomous unit outstripping anything the humans had to offer. Still, it wasn't enough. If she wanted to leave this system, she needed a vehicle that could go beyond light speed, and the recon craft could not. She had to find another route back to civilization.

The Terrans were not that route. Not for her. Thora and Crest had pursued that course; Crest had very nearly paid for that decision with his life. Humans had put him on trial, meaning to execute him. That hadn't happened. But Crest had been lucky; nothing more. This planet was boiling over. Everyone, humans were going for each other's throats. Throwing one's lot in with them meant taking an incalculable risk.

Beyond that, she had tasted more than enough of Thora's unbearable arrogance. The da Zoltral would never lose her conceited nature, even if Crest did temper her once in a while. The old man was too weak to assert himself against Thora on a longer term basis.

Only a few meters separated the spindle ship from the ground now. The Fantan? An option, yes. A last, desperate one. When all

others were exhausted. She could do without ending up as Besun.

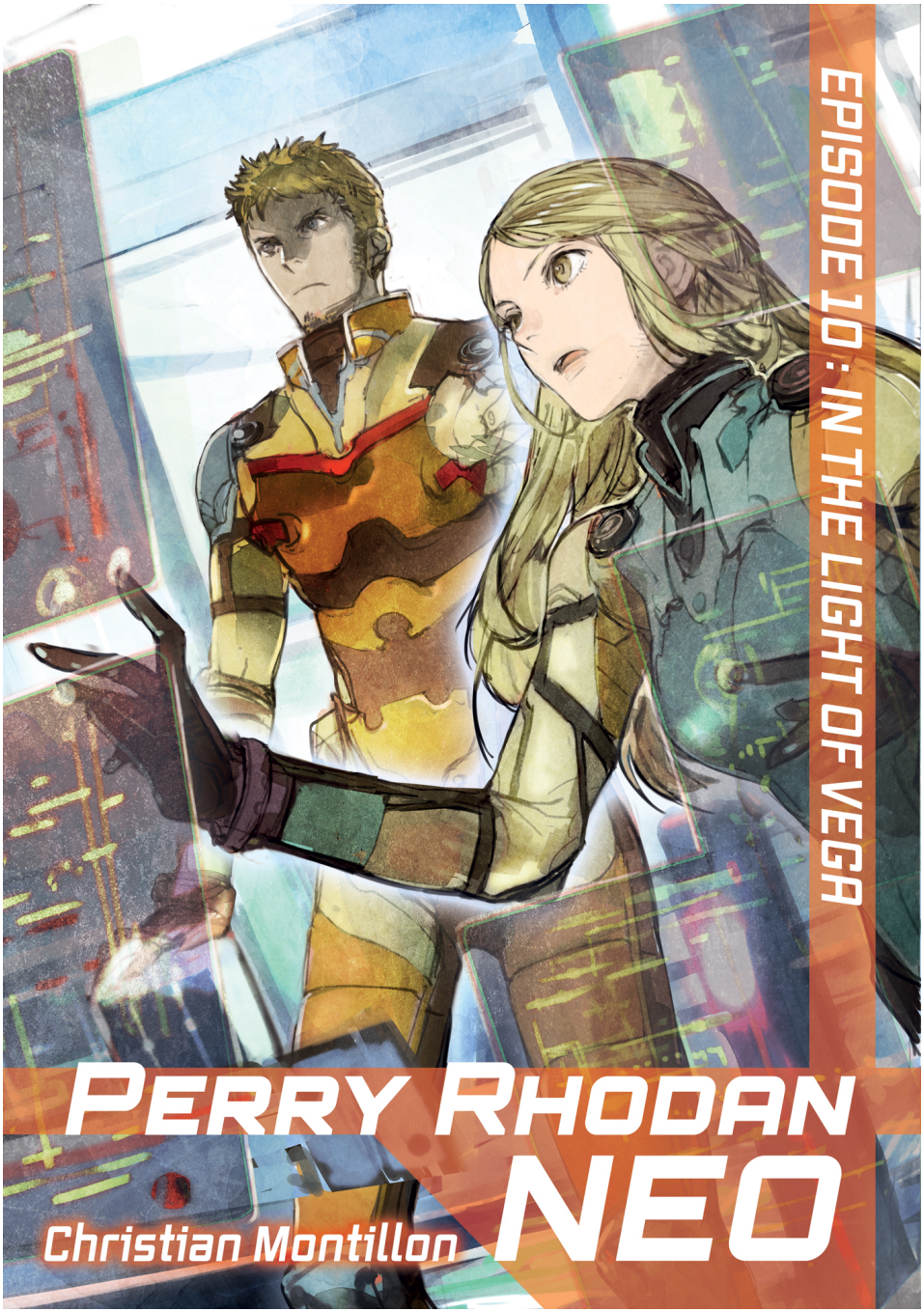
And she hadn't exhausted her options yet. She called up the current scanner data the recon craft was sending her. The large Fantan ship was generating a multitude of five-dimensional impulses. An opaque mesh, a tangle, that made it easy to overlook what really mattered.

She masked out the Fantan ship. A single five-dimensional energy impulse remained. It was weak, below the threshold of the Fantan scanner. The recon craft's high-performance scanner detected it, if only barely. The impulse kept disappearing, flickering in and out.

The impulse came from the desert. It was an impulse that couldn't originate from human technology. It was her chance, her way out.

As the Fantan ship's landing struts touched the ground, she climbed out of the trench. She got onto the motorcycle that she had stolen from a human and headed out into the desert. A trail of stirred-up sand rose up from her vehicle.

No one took any notice of her.


EPISODE 10: IN THE LIGHT OF VEGA
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Christian Montillon

Episode 10: In the Light of Vega

By Christian Montillon

Summer 2036: A new age is dawning for humanity. Perry Rhodan and a group of companions launch the first interstellar flight to be undertaken by human beings. Their destination: the Vega System.

A relentless battle has been going on there between two peoples of unequal strength. Rhodan takes the side of the weaker group in what appears to be a futile fight. He must get involved, because the outcome of the battle will decide the future of humanity…

In the meantime, the people of Earth are beset by fear and panic. The planet is occupied by an unknown race of extraterrestrials that have only one goal—to loot what they can. Rhodan's friend, Reginald Bull, places himself in danger and ends up in an ambush.

I am not sure if I am someone.

I mean, if I were someone, would I not have a name? But when I look down at myself, all I see is metal and other bits that look like they might be human. A pretty good copy, I must admit, even if it is in a terrible state at the moment.

I came to myself in the middle of the desert, in a hiding place, concealed beneath some stones. My memory units tell me that I was simply thrown away. The automatic self-repair equipment activated me some time after that to announce that something was approaching: an animal—raw material that could be used to complete me to perfection. The process is not finished yet. I am carrying the cadaver with me, just as it carried me before. The first thing I have to do is find a suitable hiding place.

In the meantime, I'm functioning so well that I can start moving again.

My name is Rico, and I have a goal.

1.

The Light of the Alien Sun
Perry Rhodan

The bottomless abyss swallowed up Rhodan. The bright whiteness of the stars, just like that other light, was nothing more than a dull and distant memory. Blackness dominated the here and now; darkness was everything and everything was in darkness, the entire universe.

Rhodan's body burned with a sudden pain, and flickering sparks danced before his eyes. Then the phantom lights were followed by real light. Life returned and the abyss spat them out. The *Good Hope* ended its flight at translight velocity.

This was all routine for Thora but an overwhelming experience for everyone else on board. And it caused overwhelming pain, which disappeared again as suddenly as it had come. The unreal flames before Rhodan's eyes also disappeared with a final flicker. The control unit of the Arkonide auxiliary craft, which he had named *Good Hope,* switched back to reality.

He took a deep breath, noticed that a little saliva was dripping from the corner of his mouth, and wiped it away with his hand. He had some difficulty bringing his mind back to reality.

While the pain lessened, he looked around at the others who had agreed to come with him on this flight into the unknown. Nine people who had to rely on one another in the strange world of outer space, who would have to work close together and trust each other blindly if they wanted to survive. Nine...if you included Thora.

She was an Arkonide, and she was as close to him as she was far away. Was she, as an intelligent, similarly sentient being, just as much a person as he himself was? Rhodan didn't know, and he did not have time to dwell on the matter. It was only one of thousands of philosophical questions that this new era presented. Humanity, and with humanity every single *Terranian,* would have to completely rethink everything they had taken for granted so far.

"I see you are all suffering," he heard Thora's voice say. "That's normal when you re-enter the standard universe. One of the effects of jumping to a place that is many light years away."

"Transition pain," Rhodan managed to squeeze out. Crest had already told him about it in Terrania, but compared to what he had been told, experiencing it himself was like the difference between a scribbled drawing by a small child and a masterpiece by a gifted

artist.

Of much more importance was the oversized hologram that was floating in the air in front of Thora. It showed a blazing, blueish-white giant sun. *Vega* ...

Rhodan stared at the three-dimensional image. An unfamiliar solar system with worlds that were much too far away from his home planet to be clearly observed or wondered at. While Earthly technology had proven the existence of planets in the Vega system years ago, this here exceeded Rhodan's wildest dreams. Light years away from home and obviously inhabited by alien intelligence...and almost close enough to reach out and touch.

The gigantic sun, Vega, was at the center of this solar system. Some areas of the hologram were still slightly out of focus; blurred, even. Thora emphasized that the scanning systems were collecting new data all the time in order to provide a perfect image.

"It normally goes a lot faster, but the *Good Hope* is unfortunately not in the best condition."

Despite these limitations, it took Rhodan's breath away when he saw the planets revolving around the sun, not to mention the huge number of moons that were orbiting the individual worlds. Some planets had no satellites, some of them had only one like Terra, and others had three, five or even half a dozen in some cases. He stared at the holographic image, and now that he was able to concentrate better, his thoughts were focused fully on exploring what he saw.

On Earth they already knew a great deal about Vega. For decades it had been considered a well-researched system. And yet now, seeing it in cosmic proximity changed everything. As an astronaut, Rhodan knew a great deal about this star. He knew, for example, that it was bigger and much brighter than his own sun—but actually *being here* was totally different from merely knowing through research. The feeling was overwhelming. He couldn't wait to not only see a hologram, but examine the sun directly as well as some of its planets.

"Confused?" Thora asked. "Not all solar systems are as small and cozy as your own."

And yet she too appeared to be filled with a certain respect for what she saw. They were still surrounded by the illuminated, virtual steering interfaces, as they had been since their departure. With the help of the holographic elements, Thora had steered the

Good Hope with ease and expertise from Terra to the transition leap. As if she were playing an instrument for her own entertainment—indeed, more than that. It was as if she were directing an entire orchestra in perfect harmony with thousands of hand gestures at the same time. The transition pain didn't even make the Arkonide flinch for a second as far as Rhodan could tell.

The holographic dashboards were still lit up at hip height all around her, but she no longer had to operate them. The *Good Hope* had ended its journey for now, and the auxiliary craft floated in the empty space of the alien solar system.

The leap across several light years was behind them. They had covered a distance that went far beyond anything Rhodan could imagine. He could juggle the numbers, and he was able to relate distances to one another, but he was unable to truly grasp a distance of this magnitude in reality. His imagination capitulated, but only out of necessity. All his life, the distance between the Earth and the Moon had been the maximum his people could overcome, and it was only possible using every means available and at great risk to life and limb. By comparison, that now seemed like less than the first tiny step taken by a toddler.

Thora turned away from the hologram of the Vega system, let her head drop back, and briefly looked at the ceiling of the central control room arching above her, then closed her eyes. Her white hair fell loosely across her shoulders and down her back. The light played on her chin. She breathed out, stiffened, and appeared to be thinking about something. Or was she trying to gain control of her emotions? But what was it that was affecting her?

"What do we already know about this system?" Rhodan asked.

She answered without opening her eyes. "The scanning systems are constantly supplying new data, which the real-image hologram uses to perfect what we see. I undertook all basic safety measures immediately after our arrival. There is no ship in the immediate vicinity, which seems very strange to me, considering we received a call for help. We could just as easily have found ourselves in the middle of a space battle and under attack. Or with all of our atoms blasted away."

Rhodan nodded, unable to take his eyes off the image of the blueish-white sun in the middle of the hologram. "Thank-you, Thora. Having your help is vital. I am not under the illusion that any one of us could steer the *Good Hope* anywhere near as well as

you can."

She looked directly at him with her red eyes. "You should take care not to emphasize your weakness too much."

"I don't see any reason not to speak the truth among friends. Here in outer space, we depend on each other. Perhaps you will soon also depend on us."

Her cool, light-skinned face remained expressionless at first, and then emotional tears welled up in her eyes. "It wouldn't be the first time."

Rhodan smiled. They were growing together to form a unit. All of them. But now he was extremely curious to discover the wonders of this strange solar system.

He was suddenly torn out of his sense of amazed fascination by Tako Kakuta, who was screaming. The tortured sound changed to a gurgling noise, and the Japanese mutant grabbed at his throat. His face turned blue, he staggered, and his arms flailed helplessly in the air. He was desperately trying to find something to hold on to, but in vain.

A second later he collapsed. As he fell, his head banged against the feet of the telekinetic Anne Sloane, who had been trying to hold him up. His teeth made a loud noise as they snapped together.

When Rhodan kneeled down beside him, a small red blister had already formed on the man's lips. His mouth opened and a single, dark drop of blood like a pearl had gathered on his tongue, which then curled back into his throat. Tako Kakuta gagged and his eyes rolled.

In the state he was in, the risk was that he would choke on his tongue. Rhodan carefully stretched Kakuta's head backwards, but it was no use. His tongue was stuck too far in his throat, and it was blocking his airway. The teleporter tried to breathe, gasping for air, but it was in vain. A gurgling sound emerged from his mouth, his arms and legs gripped by cramps. His pupils were no longer visible; only the lower edge of his irises and far too much white could be seen, covered in small, blood-red veins.

Without hesitating for a second, Rhodan grabbed Kakuta's lower jaw, pressed his thumbs, index fingers, and middle fingers on the joints, and forced his mouth open. The Japanese man's head shook in his grip and twitched convulsively back and forth.

"Try to stay calm, Tako, I'm helping you," he said, without knowing whether his companion could even hear him. He quickly

grabbed Kakuta's tongue and pulled it forward. His fingers were covered in blood-streaked saliva.

The teleporter gurgled. His lower jaw took on immense strength as a reflex snapped it closed. Rhodan was unable to hold it with his free hand and, at the same time, he was unable to pull the hand back fast enough. The man's teeth clamped down painfully on his thumb.

Someone suddenly grabbed Kakuta's head. Ras Tschubai pulled the teleporter's jaws apart so that Rhodan could free his fingers. Rhodan's entire hand was gripped by a throbbing pain. The short seizure ended, and Kakuta's body stretched out, then he lay motionless on the floor.

"Unconscious," Tschubai explained without saying anything else about the occurrence, "but he's breathing. No acute danger."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not a doctor and I've never flown at translight speed before on an Arkonide spacecraft..." Tschubai said, giggling but completely without amusement. "But yes, I'm quite sure."

Rhodan tried to suppress the shaking of his injured hand. Small flesh wounds, nothing more. He was able to move his fingers. "Thank you!"

The Sudanese man laughed, but this time it sounded genuine. The skin around his mouth was wrinkled, and a drop of sweat glistened on his forehead where his shortly shorn hair began. "Don't mention it. When Anne has honed her telekinetic skills to perfection, she can perhaps rescue a choking man using only her mental powers. Until then we have to do it the old-school way."

"You have totally the wrong idea about telekinesis," Anne answered. Then she folded her arms in front of her body. "Or maybe you're right, and I have to hone my skills in order to gain more control over them!"

She sounded like someone who was ready to get started. That's what she had been like when Rhodan had first made her acquaintance—casual, spontaneous, even a little overexcited, as if she wanted to play down the unbelievable aspect that her telekinetic abilities gave to her life. There was a great deal of hidden potential in her, and she had the willpower and steely character necessary to release it.

"So, is he okay?" Thora's voice was full of sympathy, an emotion that Rhodan would have thought impossible from her only

a short time ago. But she had a special relationship with Tako Kakuta. The teleporter had saved her life when she was nearly burned alive in the crashed Arkonide ship after the battle with Clifford Monterny. “I have never heard of symptoms like this during a transition leap. Everybody deals with pain differently. It must have hit him pretty hard.”

“He will get over it,” Ras Tschubai said firmly.

“Then let’s take a closer look at the current information we have about this solar system,” Thora said. She was back to being distant, and it once again reminded Rhodan of the unapproachable ship’s commander who had thought herself above everyone else when he had first met her on the Moon.

“It’s important to get your priorities right,” he said.

She looked him straight in the eyes. “How true.” She smiled in her own impenetrable way, cool and beautiful like the perfectly harmonious statue of an Ancient Greek goddess. Her snow-white hair reinforced her aloof aura.

The control center of the Arkonide craft did not provide a direct view of the outside. Several dozen meters and several walls of Arkon steel, particularly in the outer shell of the spherical ship, lay between them and outer space. The hologram in front of Thora, however, provided a more than sufficient substitute, presenting a now perfect, three-dimensional image of their cosmic environment.

Tschubai stepped forward and stretched out a hand. His fingertips stopped just before the outer boundary of the hologram, in which planets and moons were in constant motion. The only thing standing still was the sun, a glowing ball of flame the size of a fist—in reality, gigantic—at the center of the hologram. His fingers stretched into the map of the solar system. They were shaking, as the mutant could hardly contain his excitement at what he saw.

“How many worlds are there?”

“42 planets,” the Arkonide woman told him. “The number of moons is irrelevant.”

“For you, perhaps. You’ve seen it already. But I...” Tschubai stopped mid-sentence. He was obviously reluctant to talk to Thora about it, as Rhodan was. This was a second that mattered, the moment when humans from Planet Earth ventured deeper into outer space than any other humans before them. Into an unfamiliar planetary system that brought forth its own life forms.

“That’s quite an overstatement, Mister Tschubai. I have not seen

everything by any means. This large collection of planets also impresses me—perhaps just as much as it impresses you, albeit in a different way. Many of these worlds are inhabited. That alone demands my respect." Thora changed the image on the display by zooming in towards Vega's sun. Some of the globes of the many worlds became larger, before racing to the side of the hologram and disappearing. "Let me show you all something."

Thora

Thora actually was impressed. She asked herself whether she would find clues in this planetary system to what she was seeking. Just like Crest. *For so long now.*

In the meantime, the three-dimensional map showed only the central star and exactly nine planets in their respective sections of their orbits around it. "I am interested in positions seven to nine." Thora spoke in the neutral tone of an instructor. "According to the scanner results, there are even more celestial bodies in this system that appear to be inhabited, but these three worlds have the highest population density. They all have an oxygen atmosphere that is very similar to the Earth's, which means that the people there, just like Arkonides and humans, can live on the same planet without protection."

She looked around the group. As expected, everyone on board had gathered around the hologram and were staring at what they saw, their eyes wide. Thora guessed their feelings were a mixture of enthusiasm and awe...something that many Arkonides, perhaps even all of them, had lost. She was relieved that she found herself in a process of transformation, that she was widening her horizons.

Of course, one person was missing among the Terranians—the Japanese man Tako Kakuta, who had not yet regained consciousness. He obviously had a weak constitution, if he had reacted so strongly to the short transition leap. Perhaps unknown factors played a role in his case; mutants and how to deal with them was completely new territory for Thora. She hoped Kakuta would soon be ready to get to work again. He was vital to their trip, which Rhodan merely regarded as a rescue mission in response to an emergency call.

Thora had committed the names of all her companions to memory. After her bitter experiences with the lethargic crew on the

Aetron, it was a pleasure to work with these humans, who were hungry for action. Only a short time ago, she would have considered a thought like that impossible.

Rod Nyssen stood at the left-hand side of the hologram, followed by Conrad Deringhouse, Darya Morozova, Alexander Baturin, Ras Tschubai, Anne Sloane, and Wuriu Sengu. Including Rhodan, five of them were astronauts, at least in their understanding of what that meant. Real space travel, however, was something completely different than the short ventures from their own planet to its satellite, which was all the humans had managed to date. If they lived long enough, they were in for a great many surprises.

The mutants without any experience in space travel could be valuable helpers—whether the teleporters Tschubai and Kakuta, the telekinetic Anne Sloane or Wuriu Sengu (the so-called scout, who could see through solid matter as if it didn't exist).

It was an interesting coincidence that these days, so many men and women on Earth were discovering they had special powers. If you could even call it a coincidence, especially considering the home planet of the humans was located so close to the Vega system. However, Thora was not sure whether—

She interrupted her chain of thought. There were unfortunately more pressing matters to be dealt with. One thing after the other. How had Rhodan put it? *It's important to get your priorities right.*

"With some probability," she continued, "the call for help that brought us here came from one of these worlds in positions seven to nine. To jog everyone's memories, I'll play the recording of the words back to you again."

She flicked a switch and the words that everyone on board could probably quote verbatim sounded through the control center once again.

Lizards have found us. They will overrun our system! Darkness is driving out the light! You live longer than the sun, it is said. Hurry! Kerlon.

"The next point is," she said, as the call for help faded, "none of us knows anything about this system that you call Vega. Neither Crest nor myself had heard of it, and we were unable to find any records of it in our few remaining Positronics. The origin of the hypercom transmission was nevertheless correctly allocated, and there is no doubt whatsoever that it came from this system. Even if

everything looks peaceful."

"Let's not be tricked by appearances," the Russian cosmonaut Darya Morozova said. "These lizards that are mentioned in Kerlon's message... What does that refer to?"

Thora had, of course, already come up with a theory about that, but she did not want to reveal what it was until she had some evidence. "As I already mentioned, this world is just as unfamiliar to me as it is to you. The flowery language about darkness driving out the light comes across as a little confusing."

"Just like the statement that something—or someone—lives longer than the sun," Rhodan added. "Perhaps we should try to find out who this Kerlon, the sender of the message, is."

Live longer than the sun... Thora looked at one of the virtual displays she used as a screen and on which the ship's Positronic was ceaselessly analyzing the incoming scanner data. "The capabilities of the *Good Hope* are unfortunately limited, and your wish would require us to overcome these limits. We should not mistake technology for magic."

"I don't intend to. All I would like to know is the exact origins of the call for help..."

"Just a moment," Thora interrupted. "The ship's systems have intercepted a data flow that is underlaid with visual information. It's decoding and transmitting as we speak. If we're lucky, we will be able to see an inhabitant of this solar system any second now."

If the *Good Hope* had not been such a wreck, they would have been able to see the image already. Nevertheless, the partially destroyed Arkonide auxiliary craft was still superior to many of the ships other civilizations that could travel at translight speed had. Thora doubted the inhabitants of this solar system could bring forth anything with equal capabilities. However, they might be able to compensate for that disadvantage through sheer mass, and there was no backup for the *Good Hope*, no further units to support the ship and her crew. That meant they had to be extremely careful until they knew what the strangely worded call for help was all about.

Before the decoding process could provide a holographic image, the control center shook violently. A shock wave passed through the *Good Hope*, the absorbers unable to neutralize it. Metal groaned and a shrill-sounding alarm blasted through the ship's interior.

Thora tensed herself and was able to stay on her feet; Rhodan

managed to as well. Rod Nyssen fell over, and Anne Sloane let out a short cry. Thora was not aware of the others. With a routine hand movement she had carried out a thousand times before, she typed automatic commands into the illuminated dashboard. She didn't even have to look down to do it.

The hologram of the inner planets disappeared. A final dot of light flared up and then it was gone, replaced by another image that was schematic and stylized; one that no longer sought to impress by displaying visual details, instead supplying plain, effective information.

It was just as Thora had feared. In the middle of the system, ships were plunging back into normal space. Large ships. Battleships. And, by the Gods of the stars, the *Good Hope* found herself bang in the midst of it all!

2.

A Spindle in the Desert
Sid González

The formerly chubby boy was sweating in the heat of the Gobi Desert. He had always produced far too much sweat, and it made him smell like rotten seaweed—at least that's how the other boys living on the street had described it. He was now thin and his strength was fading fast because his teleporting powers drained him—but his sweating had not disappeared.

Damn!

It was one of the things he really didn't like about himself. The list wasn't exactly short, but it was not something he ever spoke to others about. What Sid González thought about himself was no one else's business.

"I always wanted to meet an alien," he said, "and the Arkonides are great. Well, some of them. Which is why I'm looking forward to meeting these fantasy people." He really was excited about it and could hardly wait.

"Fantan people," Sue corrected him—the small, dainty, and disfigured Sue Mirafiore with only one arm. Sid knew she would have loved to run to get ahead faster, but Reginald Bull had told them it was important for them to give the impression to the outside world that they were calm and collected. And that meant, more than anything else, that running was absolutely out of the question.

"Fantan," she repeated. "Not *Fantasy,* do you understand?"

Sid tapped his forehead with his finger. "Yeah, sure. I can't remember every stupid detail old man Crest comes out with right away. What did he tell us about these...eh..."

"Fantan," Sue said slowly, as if speaking to a small child. While speaking, she lifted the arm that was a stump, causing a bump that moved below her t-shirt.

It looks like there's a giant spider crawling beneath her top, Sid

thought. But he liked spiders. He was becoming tired and cranky. *If I wasn't a teleporter, Reginald Bull would almost certainly not have picked me to come on this first-contact mission. It's true I would miss a great deal, but I could lie around and chill on a couch somewhere in Terrania, enjoy a little nap.* But moaning away to himself inside his head didn't help him any. "So, what was it Crest said about these people?"

"Practically nothing," Bull replied, stepping into the conversation for the first time. "That's the problem. We have very little information. The old Arkonide saw the spindle spaceship as it was coming in to land next to Terrania, and he said it probably belonged to the Fantan. That was all."

"Super," Sid said with a groaning sound. "Even I could have given that much information. I could've just made a name up. Listen." He put on a voice. "The ship is possibly carrying Jeroen people. It's easy enough to say, and if it turns out later to be wrong...well, people do make mistakes."

"What are you going on about, Sid?" Sue sounded aggressive, like a rattlesnake on the attack. "I hardly think Crest meant it like *that*."

He didn't know what was wrong with him. Maybe it was the exhaustion or the feeling that he was getting in over his head in this new situation. The fear. His life. It was all going so fast. Where had the time gone, the time when he was a street boy, a nobody who nobody was interested in and who could do or not do as he pleased?

In the meantime—no matter how modest he remained—he had to admit that he had become one of the most important people on Earth. A teleporter. A person who people came to when they wanted to make first contact with aliens from the stars, who had just landed in a very strange-looking, *extremely big* spaceship right next to the emerging city of Terrania. The planned new capital city of an Earth united in peace, if Rhodan and the other dreamers—of which he was one—had anything to do with it.

The ship of these Fantan people—Sid had deliberately acted in a snotty manner as if he had forgotten what they were called—looked as if a mentally unstable engineer and spaceship designer had had the idea to glue two half torpedoes together by the pointed ends. Or, to use Bull's more sober description, it had the same shape as a spindle, although Sid didn't even know what that meant, as he

had never seen a spindle before.

And it was very unlikely that anyone on this planet had ever seen a spindle that stretched up into the sky as high as this one did. It was 400 meters high, Bull had said as he aimed his pod in its direction to carry out some measurements from afar. Four hundred meters! Hundreds or even thousands of these extraterrestrials named Fantan could be sitting inside it. An entire army that first of all razed Terrania to the ground and then conquered all of the superpowers on Earth.

And then it would be over—the history of Sid González, Sue Mirafiore, Reginald Bull and all the other so-called heroes. Over and out. The end!

There were five people who wanted to make sure it never went that far: Reginald Bull, currently the boss of Terrania, for as long as Perry Rhodan was absent.

Eric Manoli, former doctor on board the *Stardust* and the man who had saved Crest's life.

Sue Mirafiore, the girl who looked younger than she was and who had turned out to have strange powers too. As if all such powers were not strange. Sid, for example, had still not become accustomed to his own.

And there was also Tatiana Michalovna, who until recently had been the willing sidekick of one of the most horrible creatures Sid had ever set eyes on. She had bad breath and sometimes stank of alcohol, but people like Crest and Bull seemed to have a high opinion of her.

And there was Sid González, the fifth member of the group. His real first name was Chico, but he had almost forgotten that. He was a perfectly normal boy. At least, he wished he was. He had not chosen to be a hero with teleportation powers. But he was nevertheless looking forward to what came next. He had been a space and science-fiction fan his entire life, and he had always dreamed of a moment just like this one...

The omnipresent heat of the Gobi Desert made the air flicker. The buildings of Terrania, going up everywhere thanks to the constant work of an army of robots, were now behind them.

The small group reached the city limits. The Fantan spindle ship stood on the desert ground, not far from them. Waiting inside...was what? Their downfall? An enemy army? Friendly aliens who wanted to shake their hands? What might they look like? As

humanoid as the Arkonides? Did *all* peoples in space resemble one another that closely? Or were they about to encounter an intelligent fungus that didn't communicate by talking, but instead sprayed out spores in precisely measured bursts?

The thought of this made Sid laugh. Maybe he had read too many science-fiction comics after all. Intelligent fungus. What a load of nonsense. His grin turned into a laugh.

Tatiana Michalovna bent down towards him. "What's so funny, boy?"

She looked sexy in her own way. Not Sid's type and much too old. But he couldn't deny it, despite the fact that he didn't like her. She had worked with Clifford, the mutant who had instilled a terrible sense of fear in him for years, making his life hell.

"You wouldn't understand."

"You don't take all this seriously, do you? That's very dangerous!"

"So what? They're not attacking us. With a ship of that size they could easily have thrown a few bombs at Terrania, and all that would have been left was a pile of ashes."

She did not answer, although her mouth was half open, as if she wanted to say something. Her teeth were slightly yellowed, and Sid thought they looked like ivory.

"Do you know," he said, "I ask myself lots of questions. I don't know how you're feeling, but..."

"Please, be quiet," Bull interrupted. The self-confessed news junkie was typing something on his pod, and he was staring at the screen, only lifting his head every now and again to look at the huge spindle ship. "We have to concentrate."

Sid indicated the portable mini-computer. "You mean, like you are?"

"He's trying to save our asses," Manoli explained. "The landing area is being barricaded so that nobody can get in our way. He needs a lot of people to get the job done. Bai Jun, for example, or John Marshall. People with more experience than you have, Sid. The entire operation requires a great deal of organization. So please, pull yourself together!"

The boy clenched his jaw. A spark danced between his fingers. *Not now!* "Understood," he said and walked on towards the Fantan spaceship.

The Russian woman, Tatiana Michalovna, came so close to him

that their arms touched. “So you don’t think I know why you were laughing?” She whispered the words, perhaps so that Bull and the others couldn’t hear what she was saying. “You forget one thing, boy. I’m telepathic.”

He stared at her furiously, but she merely smiled at him. “Get out of my head!” he demanded.

“I was never in it. Keep calm. I’m on your side.”

“Maybe I don’t have a side,” he murmured. Tatiana wasn’t supposed to hear it; it escaped his lips out of anger. But he knew all too well that he wanted to support Perry Rhodan and therefore Reginald Bull. And if it was his job to save the Earth from this Fantan spindle, then that’s what he would do. Even if it meant having to work with people like this Russian woman.

“And one more thing before we go up there and knock loudly on the side,” Bull said. “Crest knows this spaceship. Or rather—he knows this type of spaceship. It’s a decommissioned Arkonide cargo vessel.”

“I thought it was a Fantan ship,” Sue said.

Little clueless Sue. “Weren’t you listening?” Sid cleared his throat. “A decommissioned product series. These Fantan guys probably bought them all up.”

Bull dropped his pod into his pants pocket. “There’s another thing that’s more important. This giant is not a battleship. That doesn’t *prove* that there are no enemies inside it planning an invasion, but it does give me hope. And hope is always good.”

“And hope does not disappoint,” Tatiana said in a strange tone.

Sid had heard that saying somewhere before, he was sure of it, but he couldn’t remember where. No matter. It was an unimportant detail.

Strange the things that go through your head and the things you talk about while waiting to make first contact with an alien species, Sid thought. The human brain is very inventive when it comes to keeping your mind off the unimaginable.

The small group walked further and, before Bull could actually knock on the side of the ship by hammering on its metal shell, a loud click was heard, and one of the bulkheads was pushed slowly —very slowly— outwards and to the side just above ground level.

Once it was fully open, the strangest thing Sid had ever laid eyes on emerged from within.

Reginald Bull

While the bulkhead of the alien spaceship was opening, Reginald Bull went through all of the points in his head again. It was not the first time, and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

He had put together his team fast and on very short notice without thinking long and hard about it, and without being able to pick and choose that much, because not only did everyone have to be in Terrania,. they also had to be close at hand. Nevertheless, he was satisfied with his choices.

Tatiana Michalovna, invaluable as a telepath when it came to assessing alien beings: *Check!*

Sid González, a teleporter, their mobile escape strategy personified; their path to safety: *Check!*

Sue, someone who could reinforce the powers of the other mutants and, despite her age, a wise adviser: *Check!*

Eric Manoli, a physician who might be important under the unfamiliar conditions on the spindle ship, but more than anything else was a level-headed person, a quality Reginald himself was missing: *Check!*

Reliable people like Bai Jun, John Marshall, Allan Mercant, and Lesly Pounder, who knew what responsibility meant, and who were barricading off the area surrounding the landing site so that he did not have to take care of it: *Check!*

There was no time left to think. It wouldn't have helped them anyway. They had to wait and see how the alien reacted, whether they were Fantans as Crest suspected or not.

The bulkhead, now open, revealed something. Or someone? Was *that* an extraterrestrial?

Bull, who was already about to speak his name and offer up a casual greeting, swallowed, and the words stuck in his throat. It wasn't easy to make him speechless, but what he was looking at was unbelievable.

The thing—Bull was a little ashamed of using the term, which forced its way into his mind—had to be almost two meters tall. But this very general and vague characteristic was the only aspect that was in any way comparable to a human or an Arkonide. It looked like a cylinder with fine scales and rounded ends.

It—or he. The Fantan man. Or the Fantan woman. If there's even a difference.

Bull heard Manoli groan. All that came from Sid was a stifled

sound. From the corner of his eye he saw the boy sway for a second.

Perhaps it's too much for him. I don't even know if it's too much for me!

The creature could just as easily have emerged from an ancient science-fiction movie or a technically perfect 3D horror film. It was something far beyond the realms of reality. It didn't even seem to belong in the post-*Stardust* era full of Arkonides and translight spaceships in which Perry Rhodan had just flown 27 light years to the next solar system!

In the top half of the cylindrical body there were several openings that looked like dark holes. Bull asked himself if they were the creature's sensory organs—mouth, perhaps nose, ears, or eyes. What looked like limbs stuck out at fully random places on the body. Bull discovered a total of five—no six such...arms and legs. The cylindrical body was standing on two of them, and two others were holding something that Bull could not identify; all he could see was a shiny metallic reflection as the creature bowed forward and the sun hit the object.

A second later, the Fantan was resting on one of the other extremities that Bull had first thought to be an arm. The entire figure hopped out of the bulkhead and landed on the ground of the Gobi Desert.

A small step for him, went through Bull's head, *but a great step for the Fantan people.* He almost burst out laughing, regardless of how inappropriate that would have been in the situation. But a second later the bizarre happenings brought him back to the present.

A second cylindrical body emerged from the open bulkhead. Bull immediately determined it to be extremely similar to the first alien, as if they had the same face—which was strange, because they didn't have faces at all. Then he noticed the difference which, at first glance, lay in the fact that, while this second creature also had six limbs, they were located at totally different locations on its body. Could they perhaps move their limbs freely across their bodies? Or were they positioned differently on every individual from birth? Were these creatures even born at all?

A thousand questions popped into his head, and he suddenly realized that he knew absolutely nothing of the wonders the cosmos held in store for them. All of humanity, who considered themselves to be so endlessly clever with their science and their education,

would have to rethink everything they knew. They were nothing but a speck of dust, proud of understanding themselves, but blind to the fact that all around them existed a huge desert.

Something shimmered in the hand of the figure that had left the spindle ship. And then something flew towards Bull and his companions with a buzzing sound.

Sid yelled, and out of the corner of his eye, Bull saw sparks flying.

"Don't jump!" he yelled to the boy. They had to be careful not to reveal his secret, not without real danger, because what was flying in their direction could not be a shot from a weapon—it was moving far too slowly.

A small silver disk landed on the ground in front of Bull and the others.

It looks just like a blank CD from my teenage years, he thought. He bent down and picked it up. It felt cool to the touch. The thought that it had just been touched by a completely unfamiliar alien life form sent a shiver down his spine. What if, just by touching it, he became infected with some kind of virus or bacteria that had originated on an unknown planet?

He fought against this idea by thinking that the Fantan would certainly know of a much safer way to kill him. For example, by landing their giant ship in the middle of Terrania, squashing everything and everyone beneath it. On the other hand, the Fantan might not know they had brought germs with them that could be deadly to humans. But then, an experienced space traveler surely knew enough not to make a mistake like that in the first place.

His thoughts were racing at an extraordinarily pace in circles as he argued back and forth with himself...until he saw that his companions were already picking up their silver disks. Even Eric Manoli.

At least we'll all die together, if that's what's going to happen.

An incomprehensible sound came from the Fantan. Bull looked at the alien while his disk began to vibrate lightly or pulsate with a rhythm they could not hear. The creature lifted one of its extremities; it also held a shimmering disk in its "hand," against its cylindrical body, very close to one of the gaping dark holes.

The silent request was clear. The extraterrestrial was asking them to do the same.

Bull did not hesitate for a second. It was all or nothing! He

lifted the silvery disk to his breast and wasn't even surprised when it remained stuck there by itself, while there had been no sign at all that it would stick when he had held it in his hand.

At the very same moment, the incomprehensible sounds coming from the Fantan were transformed into perfect English.

A translator, Bull realized. *These disks are automatic translating machines*. Only then did he process what the alien had said, and this first message from a new life-form was extremely strange."What do you want from us?"

He's asking what we want from him? Bull could not believe his ears. "That's exactly what I wanted to ask!" he called out.

All of a sudden, a dozen or more plate-shaped objects with a diameter of several meters raced out of the spindle ship and zoomed off into the sky in all directions. Auxiliary craft that swarmed away to spread themselves across the area, the entire country, or perhaps the whole world.

So it really is an invasion, Bull thought bitterly. But this was not the last of it.

He lifted his right hand, balled into a fist, and laid it on the silver disk as if that could reinforce his words to the alien.

"I have something to say to you!"

Reginald Bull was not going to let anyone get the better of him that easily.

3.

Rico:
What happened before

The spark of life did not ignite at the moment the sperm cell merged with the egg cell. And it did not spark at the moment of a birth, either because I was pressed out of a mother's womb, or broke my way out of an eggshell, or because someone planted an offshoot of me whose neural system had to work independently. Nor did any of the many natural processes that exist in all the universe when purely biological beings multiply apply to me.

No, my existence began anew when the auto-repair mechanisms conducted a little energy into inorganic components. To do this they used the synthetic fiber fabric from the backpack I was thrown away in. They dissolved it, converted it, and activated the underlying regeneration functions. That was the moment in which the first clear thought came to me: Rico. My name.

I immediately followed that with a question; namely, the question of whether I was somebody. An...individual. That was by no means clear, because people are generally made of flesh and blood. At least, humanoids are, and I was made in their image. When I looked down at myself, however, all I saw was metal and some things that looked like they might be human, organic.

A pretty good copy, I had to admit, even if it is in poor condition at the moment. My *body*, if I even wanted to call this heap of broken metal and scrap components that, was lying in separate pieces somewhere under stones in the desert ground.

A hiding place, my automatic memory unit explained to me, which had even remained active after I had lost consciousness. Or was deactivated. It depended on the preconditions under which one interpreted this state of affairs: a fine but by no means insignificant difference.

Whatever. It was not long ago that my remains had been deposited by someone in this place. The people responsible had

been fleeing from something. The auto-repair mechanisms had used all available means and energies to accelerate the process of awakening.

After I began thinking again, the second step came like a bolt of lightning, and I could see. What I saw was not particularly meaningful, however: my hiding place underneath a pile of stones.

But, wait a minute, there was more. An insect. It had several legs, a shiny shell made of chitin, and was clearly not endowed with intelligence. The beetle—the word suddenly came back to me—was crawling in the direction of my hand. Or, more accurately, towards the destroyed piece of scrap metal that would become my right hand once again.

Contact is imminent; my auto-repair mechanism informed me unnecessarily. I could see that for myself.

A touch—my fingers tightened—and the chitin shell cracked as it broke. I assimilated the biological substance into my own body. I was able to utilize 99.53 percent of it. Not bad! What remained was a wafer-thin, powdery substance that was finer than the desert sand.

Despite the level of effectiveness, the tiny insect was nothing more than a drop in the ocean for me. That was a saying among the inhabitants of this planet. They used images a lot when they spoke. It was an ineffective way to communicate, but had a certain charm —that I could not deny. The fact that I found pleasure in this senseless aspect of language probably had to do with the biological part of me.

The energy from this tiny piece of biomass nevertheless gave me quite a bit of mobility. Or to be more precise: it gave *my hand* mobility. And so it allowed me to be a little more positive about the dismemberment of my body. With my fingers, I pulled this fragment of my body into the hollow where the largest stone bore into the ground. And my hand really did find something. Four beetles were scurrying around there under and over one another, and there were even some grubs. They contained very high amounts of useful proteins and amino acids.

During all of this, the auto-repair mechanisms were working continuously. Soon I was not only able to think and see, but also hear and feel, and I could speak—even if that was a useless ability in my present circumstances.

Wires emerged, connected themselves, body parts came

together. Apart from that, I was also lucky that something was feeding me, and it wasn't a human.

The very imposing example of an onager lowered its head and sniffed at me. If it was even capable of simple thought, it was no doubt asking itself what was lying in the sand in front of it.

My memory storage activated itself: *onager, also Equus Hemionus, the Asiatic wild ass. When fully grown, it generally has a head and trunk length of two meters. It is similar to the Equus Asinus, the African wild ass, but has many characteristics of the horse species. It has numerous regional names, like hemione, kulan, or khur, and is known in this region of the planet as "onager."*

Before the flood of senseless information could go any further, I stopped it with a sharp mental command. Instead, I waited for the right moment. My hand, which had wandered to the insects, was the last body part to connect itself to the rest of me. The preconditions had been fulfilled.

The auto-repair mechanisms tell me the appearance of the Asiatic wild ass at exactly the moment I woke up was by no means a happy coincidence, as I had at first presumed. Quite the opposite was true; they had called, woken, and activated me as soon as they registered that the animal was approaching from a distance.

"Come," I said in a deep tone that sounded like the voice of an old man.

The donkey lifted one of its front hooves and set it down right next to me. His nostrils flared and he sniffed. Did he smell the death that was awaiting him? I jumped up, and when one foot was on the ground I clung to the animal's body.

He let out a lamentable sound and ran away. He carried me with him, and I hung on to his fat body between the galloping hooves.

At some point he stopped running. I decided that this place was far enough away from my original hiding place. The people who were perhaps looking for me would have great difficulty following my trail to this spot.

I felt a mixture of emotion and gratitude when I killed the donkey with a precise break of the neck. To shorten the creature's torment, I dug my finger at the same time into its flesh and severed its spinal cord.

I immediately continued my process of regeneration...

...and I ate.

4.

The Suffering of Strangers
Tako Kakuta

The face of his mother exploded, as did the memory of the deep sleep he had always enjoyed as a child beneath the three thick woolen blankets that his father laid over him every evening. That deep state of slumber that he was now enveloped by for the first time in years...

Only this time it was neither pleasant nor restorative. The claws of a dark beast had torn him into a dull unconsciousness, and death had passed him by, its cloak blowing behind it. Tako Kakuta could remember voices—the voice of Perry Rhodan calling his name, and of Ras Tschubai, whose breath he could feel close to his face, assuring Tako that he was still alive.

All of this had happened in the very near past, and the images that had come in the dream faded away afterwards. Kakuta opened his eyes. His head was hurting, and he only just realized what had woken him—a penetrating acoustic signal. An alarm wailing through the control center of the *Good Hope*.

"Switch it off, Thora!" he heard Rhodan say.

The noise died down almost immediately, and Thora said something, her voice trembling.

"Almost 500 ships." She sounded like she couldn't believe her eyes. "A massive invasion fleet! It takes huge resources to be able to send so many warships into battle."

Kakuta lifted his hands to his face. His fingers were shaking. The small Japanese man wiped a greasy layer of cold sweat from his forehead and sat up. Everyone was staring at Thora—no, not at her, at the holo that floated in front of her at about chest height.

"Who are these strangers?" Rhodan asked.

Thora did not answer. Her hands were flying across the virtual control unit on the monitor. "I'm redirecting the *Good Hope* on a course for the inner worlds. Away from the attackers."

Attackers? Kakuta finally stood up. Dizziness almost knocked

him back down again, but he forced himself to stay on his feet. He became aware of the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. The thickly swollen right half of his tongue was throbbing painfully.

Anne Sloane turned towards him; her fingers wound the tips of her dark hair. “You’re awake.”

“What happened?” The first words out of his mouth since he had lost consciousness hurt his throat and left behind a tickling feeling that made him cough.

“Ships.” Her voice sounded hollow and was without the extroverted vigor that usually characterized her mannerisms. Her shoulders were hanging a little. “An entire invasion fleet suddenly appeared out of nowhere.”

“Did they attack?”

“They’re still pretty reserved. And we don’t know what...” She stopped mid-sentence when Thora began speaking loudly. Anne turned towards the Arkonide woman. Kakuta was left briefly facing her back before he turned to look at Thora as well.

“I’ll bring the *Good Hope* somewhere behind the densely populated worlds seven to nine. To the third planet. The moon there is in a favorable position and can conceal us from the scanners of the alien ships, at least for the time being.”

“Will we be safe there?” Rod Nyssen, the extremely thin marathon runner who, to Kakuta, had seemed jittery and nervous at first, asked.

Thora laughed, but it was fully without humor. Her eyes had tears in them. “Taking into consideration the almost five hundred battleships, nowhere in the system is safe anymore! In addition, we are in a small auxiliary craft that was almost destroyed by a mutant. So don’t ask me about safety!”

Rhodan was obviously thinking more practically. “What can we do?”

Thora’s answer was sobering. “Nothing. All we can do is keep our eyes open and, at the first sign of real danger, get out of here as fast as possible.”

Another holo popped up in mid-air. The illuminated dots joined together to form the shape of an alien ship, an elongated, thin cylinder with a sphere at its center. A column of numbers was running down the holo next to the image of the ship. Thora pointed at the figures and transferred the Arkonide data into the Earthly measuring system. “Most of the units measure 250 meters in

length."

Tako Kakuta's hands curled up involuntarily to form fists. Every single one of the alien vessels was gigantic compared to the *Good Hope*, which only had a diameter of sixty meters. He cursed the fact that he had lost consciousness, making him miss their first minutes in the Vega system. Where had the ships come from? Were there already signs of life from the inhabitants of this solar system?

It was clear to him that this was not the right time to ask questions. Thora's and Anne's reactions showed that nobody on board knew anything more at present.

The map on the holo changed. Another spaceship emerged, similar to the first one and yet...bigger. *Bigger!*

"Eight hundred meters," Thora said with a sharp intake of breath. "In the invasion fleet there are a few craft with a length of eight hundred meters. Huge battleships. Troop transporters. We should disappear from this system as fast as we can."

"We'll wait," Rhodan decided. "We need to observe and find out what's going on here!"

"What does it look like?" Thora asked. "What is that word your people use without understanding for a second what it means? The apocalypse is upon us!"

At first Tako Kakuta thought Thora's choice of words was too dramatic, too panicky. However, a few seconds later he understood that he could not have offered a more fitting description of what this solar system was facing.

The holo of the external rangefinder showed an unbelievable assembly of troops coming together. Like clouds of insects, the ships broke out of the orbits of the populated worlds and their moons. They were filigree structures—elongated and delicate, not designed to actually land on a planet. The types of ships that humans might one day have built if the Arkonides had not turned up. If humanity managed not to destroy either themselves or the planet that provided them with the foundations for life itself.

The largest ships were about a kilometer in length. They rotated slowly on their own longitudinal axes in order to provide their crews with a kind of artificial gravity. The fleet of the aggressors gathered at the height of the orbit of the eleventh planet around the sun. They appeared to be waiting. None of the ships made a move to attack.

"The number of ships on both sides is roughly the same." Thora

pointed to the virtual screen in front of her, which displayed a schematic map of the solar system. Every ship, whether it belonged to the defenders or the attackers, formed a symbol that was reminiscent of a looped letter: *g*; the planet inhabitants' formation was illuminated blue, while that of the aggressors was red. "Even so, the aggressors have the bigger and therefore stronger units."

Lizards have found us, popped into Kakuta's head again. He felt nauseous when he realized the sheer strength of the destructive force that had come to overrun the worlds of Vega. A war of terrible, more than *global* magnitude threatened to break out, because not only one world was facing its demise. Or would the inhabitants of the Vega system be able to defend themselves? Did they possibly have the better weapons?

No matter what—the way things were looking, they were about to witness a *massacre.* Or, as Thora had put it, the apocalypse.

"We have reached our position near the moon," the Arkonide informed the others. "I'm on alert, ready to flee at any moment."

"Do that, Thora," Rhodan said.

The words loosened a knot in the teleporter's stomach that he had only just noticed was there. Once again beads of sweat appeared on his skin, this time fresh and on his neck. Rhodan's next sentence, however, made clear what he really meant.

"Be on alert. We'll wait and collect as much information as we can. And perhaps..." He stopped without finishing the sentence. Nobody inquired further.

The Japanese man thought he knew what Rhodan had intended to say; he thought he knew the former American astronaut well enough. *"And perhaps we can intervene, before it is too late."*

That was precisely the wild hope that had gripped Perry Rhodan. Kakuta felt exactly the same way. But his hands were tied. On Earth, the *Good Hope* might represent massive power, but on this battlefield it was only a tiny ship in the midst of an overwhelming superior force that would undoubtedly be obliterated in seconds.

Only moments later, the first shots were fired, and the space battle began.

Perry Rhodan

Rhodan stared at the hologram, and in that very same second,

one of the symbols disappeared. It represented one of the filigree spaceships of the planetary inhabitants.

The symbol disappearing meant an exploded ship. The death of an entire crew, perhaps dozens or more intelligent beings. Intelligent beings like those who had made the call for help across the borders of their stellar system. Beings full of fear and in the certainty that they were entering a dreadful war.

Another blue symbol disappeared as the groups of ships approached one another. Then a third and a fourth.

Rhodan watched the scene unfold before him, and never in his life had he felt so helpless. Even more helpless than during the Moon mission in the *Stardust*, when it had become clear that he and his crew would suffocate on Earth's satellite. Back then, it was the stranded *Aetron* that had saved them from certain death. Such a miracle would not happen in this case.

Eight symbols had now disappeared.

"Thora," Rhodan said. Nothing more. His lips were ice-cold.

"We can't just sit here doing nothing," he tried again.

The Arkonide had drawn her arms up tight and held them folded below her chest, resting on her belly. Her fingertips left deep folds in the fabric of her uniform, as if she wanted to bore her way through it. She was extremely tense. In a state of shock.

Radio messages came in—Thora had switched the transmissions to the loudspeaker. They heard words in an unknown language that the on-board computer was still unable to sufficiently analyze. However, one thing was certain: they were emergency calls. Desperate calls for help.

Seventeen symbols had disappeared before the groups of hostile units merged with one another at the height of the twelfth planet's orbit. On the display, things became darker...and darker...

By the time the first ship of the aggressors had vanished, forty-seven of the defenders' vessels were nothing more than a memory. The feeling of powerlessness tormented Rhodan. It was horrible to have to watch and not be able to intervene. So many intelligent beings had died in just a few minutes in a war whose background he knew nothing about and which nevertheless shook him to the core.

It was clear to him that the most reasonable thing he could do was withdraw the *Good Hope* while there was still a chance to get away. Whatever might happen in the coming minutes and hours,

they would not be able to change much. And the last thing that would help them with their own problems on Earth was to be drawn into another conflict.

Yet, he hesitated. More than that, actually, he was unable to simply run away. He could not turn to flee and leave the Vega system and its inhabitants to their fate. Whether it was destiny or merely a cosmic coincidence that had brought him to this place, he could not ignore it. He had to find out what was going on.

"Thora," he said, this time in a firmer, more determined tone of voice. "We need to get closer to the main planets."

Her eyes were burning, as red as fire, red with fury. "That is madness! Have we not seen enough already? What use can we be?"

That was exactly the question Rhodan was waiting for. What use could they be if they were not going to interfere directly in the battle or be able to support the inhabitants of Vega? But he already knew the answer to that question. It lay right in front of him, and the logic of it was so convincing that it just had to determine their actions from now on.

"What's happening here today can just as easily happen in our own solar system tomorrow," he argued. "In cosmic dimensions, Earth is a stone's throw away for these aggressors. If this superior power attacks us, that will be the end of humanity! We can't even defend ourselves to the extent the Vega inhabitants can. They're far superior to us, and yet they still haven't got a chance."

After he had stated his case, there was absolute silence, which Tako Kakuta was the first to break.

"You are right." The words did not seem to come easily to him. "We need information."

Thora did not share her opinion with the others, instead staring spellbound at the images on the virtual screen, which only she could see. "There is one way to find out more," she finally said. "Much more."

I knew it, Rhodan thought. Thora was the wild card in this game, the great variable with an invaluable wealth of experience and knowledge about the things that, only a short time ago, lay far beyond what most human beings could even imagine possible. It would have been inconceivable for Rhodan to be drawn into a space battle of such dimensions.

He lifted his head and looked at her, waiting. There was nothing in her attitude that suggested the horror she had felt only

minutes before, which had temporarily paralyzed her. The anger was also gone, but that had only been a way of channeling her frustration over her own sense of helplessness. Or was he projecting human behavioral patterns onto her? How well did he really know Thora da Zoltral, the proud and steely Arkonide? She might have changed, but did that mean he was able to second-guess her motives or understand her in any meaningful way? Or was she hiding something from him?

After they had arrived here the Vega system, he'd had the brief impression that she was not as unfamiliar with it as she had made out. He had a feeling that she knew, or was at least able to guess, more than she had yet revealed. What was this woman driven by?

"The Positronic," she said, "has managed to analyze the language and translate the radio messages. As we suspected, there were further calls for help. But not of a general kind."

"And of what kind were they?"

"Alarm signals from rescue capsules. Several of them have been destroyed in the meantime, but one capsule is still transmitting calls for help. According to the scanner data, it is damaged but not completely destroyed." Thora took a deep breath. "The shipwrecked craft is floating in space not far from here. We need to be quick. I'll enter the coordinates."

There it was—the opportunity to not just stand by and look on, but to become actively involved. "I'll put on a spacesuit," Rhodan announced. "Daria, you can accompany me!"

The Russian cosmonaut nodded. There was no discussion, nor were there any unnecessary questions. Things now had to happen fast. Every second counted.

"Perry!" Anne Sloane spoke up as Rhodan was already heading towards the equipment room that held a handful of Arkonide spacesuits and battledresses; the meager remains of what was once a far better-equipped ship. "I know I've never been in space," the telekinetic continued, "but my powers might be of some use if we find a partially destroyed rescue capsule."

Rhodan noted the determination in her tone. He was used to making decisions fast, which was what he was known for during his time at NASA. He agreed, and shortly afterwards not only three, but four of them were rushing towards the equipment room. Ras Tschubai, the teleporter, had decided to join them as well.

They were ready to rescue the shipwrecked crew from their

capsule.

Ready to leave the *Good Hope*.

5.

First contact
Sid González

Sid remembered that he had wondered only a few days ago whether the spindle spaceship was perhaps occupied by an intelligent form of fungus. He had thought it a ridiculous idea. And, in fact, that's exactly what it was—but for a completely different reason from what he had originally thought. The reality was even more bizarre than his imagination. He could at least picture an intelligent fungus, somehow, having read a lot of comics. But...this thing here? This scaly cylindrical whatever?

The silvery disks seemed much more real to him. Of course, a translation machine of this quality would have been inconceivable only a short time ago, but when you considered what the Arkonides were capable of, nothing was that surprising anymore. Sid, in any case, decided that he wasn't giving back his translation disk anytime soon.

"I've got something to say to you!" Reginald Bull called out—well, screamed, actually, to the alien standing by his side. Sid could tangibly feel his horror, his fear, since the first auxiliary craft had left the spindle ship a few moments ago to zoom away in all directions. Bull was probably afraid that these small spaceships were going into position above the city so that they could raze it to the ground.

Sid did not consider these creatures to be a particular threat. The Fantan looked very strange and grotesque, but in his opinion they didn't appear to be frightening or dangerous. They didn't look like monsters. Of course, that didn't say anything about their intentions, but Sid had this—feeling. And if they had destruction in mind, why did they first land with their main ship? More than anything else, Sid was fascinated, and he felt as if he were in one of his dreams of a better future.

"The Earth is our planet!" Bull continued. "We would like to welcome you as benevolent guests, but what gives you the right to

take your auxiliary craft and—"

"Be quiet," one of the cylindrical beings interrupted him. It was the one that had left the ship. One of the black holes in its fine-scaled body opened a little when the words came out, so that was obviously its mouth.

Very interesting, Sid found. His fingers curled around the edges of the silver disk. He was wondering whether he should just try to teleport into the spaceship. It was a ridiculously short distance, so he didn't see why it wouldn't be possible. It was a crazy idea, to take a look at the...machine room, at the engine, the control center...

The Fantan lifted two of its six arms and folded them across its chest. They were extremely mobile and flexible, not like human arms at all, as if they had a dozen joints or no bones. In his head, Sid called them tentacles, which might not be a fully correct description, but it made sense to him.

The alien came a little closer on the three tentacles it used as legs. "We are ready to talk with Besun."

"Besun?" Reginald Bull asked. "If you have been poking around in my head telepathically, you've made a mistake," he said. "My name is *Bull,* not Besun."

The Fantan answered with a blubbery sound that reminded Sid surprisingly of something he knew from his childhood. In his mind's eye he could see the creature in front of him again, a stray dog if he was not mistaken; its bark sounded like the laugh of a hoarse man. And that's what the noise this cylindrical creature was making sounded like as it stretched up a few centimeters on its tentacle legs.

"A strange thought, Bull. *Besun* is *Besun.* Your name is completely different. Come into the *Sregar-Nakut*."

"Is that the name of the spindle ship?" Sid asked, earning him a stern look from the astronaut. Sid did not have to be a telepath to understand that Bull was signaling to him: *Let me do the talking.*

And so the small group started walking: Bull at its head with Tatiana Michalovna, followed by Eric Manoli, then Sid and Sue who, whether deliberately or without even realizing it, were always by his side, following close behind.

"We must be careful," the former ship's doctor warned. Although he said it to Bull, Sid also heard it. And the Fantan could no doubt understand every word thanks to the silver disk.

However, Sid kept that to himself. He didn't want to be issued another warning. And anyway, Manoli's words were not that important. If the aliens had even the slightest bit of intelligence, they would hardly be surprised by such words. Or would they? Perhaps they thought in completely different ways to humans; it was possible they didn't understand what their landing on this planet meant for its inhabitants.

The Fantan was standing only a few steps away. Bull looked at him unflinchingly. "You know my name now. What's yours?"

"Jenves," the strange being answered. "Let's continue the conversation in our ship. But not her." He pointed with a stretched-out tentacle at Tatiana Michalovna.

The group of five Terranians paused. "Why not?" Bull asked. "She's one of us. We can't just leave her behind. There's a reason she's part of my group. She—"

"No discussion! She is not *Besun*," came the answer, giving no real explanation.

Why did the silver disks translate everything, but not that word? Sid thought for a moment that it was an error in the translation function before he realized that there was perhaps no corresponding term in their language. Cleverer brains than his would soon have to look into questions like that. This was probably not going to be the last problem of understanding that humanity would have to face.

What could it mean? The Russian was not Besun*,* while the others, including himself, were? It couldn't have anything to do with being male or female; otherwise, they would also have banned Sue from entering. Or did the Fantan see her as a child and not a woman? It might also be the case that they did not know what the difference between a woman and a man, or a child was. These two aliens certainly did not come across as either male or female. They might be unisex creatures like worms, who multiplied in a completely different way. Sid didn't know very much about it, but he had seen something of that sort in a science-fiction film.

"We are waiting for your decision," the Fantan said grimly. "You are welcome guests. This woman is not."

"I'm going into the ship," Sid called out impulsively. He was not going to miss out on this one-in-a-lifetime opportunity, even if the idea of it made him feel a little queasy.

"We'll follow you and accept your request," Bull told the alien.

Sid admired his choice of words. By referring to the order given concerning the Russian woman Michalovna as a request, he completely reframed the situation. The outcome was the same, while the way it was interpreted was very different. “Tatiana, go back to Terrania. We’ll be hearing from one another soon.”

The Russian woman looked at him and nodded slowly. Sid asked himself whether Bull was simultaneously mentally conveying a message to her that she was supposed to read from his mind telepathically. She turned around and marched, taking long strides, back to the city.

Sid and the three others walked past the Fantan. The extraterrestrial smelled like dried herbs and somehow…oily. The boy didn’t like it. The second stranger, who had been standing motionless on the spindle ship’s bulkhead the entire time, made way for them, and the small group entered the ship, an exotic unknown world.

Something touched first Sid’s arm and then his hand. It was Sue’s fingers. “I’m scared,” she whispered.

He surprised himself with his reply. “Me too.”

Skelir

Although Skelir was afraid, he hoped he could go.

While Jenves and Rokarn, as first responders, took care of the inhabitants of this planet, he sat several decks higher in the small casino room and played for his fate. If he was unlucky, he would have to replace Rokarn and be responsible for taking care of them and the delivery.

He felt sorry for Jenves, whose orders were to stay in the *Sregar-Nakut*. But the last Besun-craft in the large hangar was just about to take off and was only waiting for one passenger. Only one question remained—whether Rokarn or Skelir would be allowed to go on the hunt for Besun. The other one would stay behind with Jenves and would have to take care of annoying formalities.

“Your stake, please,” the metallic voice of the old Positronic rasped. “The selection game begins.”

“Haven’t I been punished enough?” Skelir answered, knowing exactly how the soulless machine would react to this usual complaint. And he was right.

“A deformity does not change the duties of a Fantan as long as

he remains fully operational. Which is so in your case. The loss of two extremities does not restrict you, and you can still carry out simple jobs without a problem."

"Yes! I understand. I know the rules, so stop it!" The scales on the back of Skelir's body spread out in reaction to this rhetorical chatter. He had heard it a thousand times before. Sometimes he wished the Positronic knew what it felt like to be maimed! It was so annoying that a machine could not experience something like that, including the pain and the feelings of torment that awaited him afterwards—including the fear of what at the same time was the only thing that lessened his self-loathing a little: Besun.

"In this case, if you know the rules," the voice from the gaming table rang out, "your stake, please."

Skelir thought for a second of smashing up the acoustic output. But what would it have changed? He had thought long and hard about his stake before the game. He was aiming high, but tried to weigh up the potential loss against the possible benefit.

"Besun number 22-zerosix-74 from my own personal belongings." He opened with his first and at the same time only move.

"Rokarn has already offered 03-eleven-77." There was a second's pause. The evaluation was running. "You lose. I'll inform Rokarn that he can leave the ship in the last craft. You and Jenves will form the emergency crew on board and take care of the messengers who have come from the planet's inhabitants."

Skelir dropped down onto his four remaining limbs and used them as legs. *Oh, great!* His fear disappeared for a second, but he was still not happy. Once again it was he who was left with the tiresome job to do. And with Jenves, of all colleagues, who was not exactly the most pleasant or most amusing of the possible partners he might have been assigned.

But the selection game had chosen, and there was no changing that. The tiresome guard duty was now left to them. Skelir decided to make the best of it. It didn't hurt to have a little optimism.

He left the casino room and was on his way. Seeing the corridor so empty and deserted only made him feel worse, because it reminded him of the fact that nearly everyone else was out there. A new world, a new playing field, wonderful opportunities for Besun.

The lighting in the entire spaceship was in emergency operation mode, and even this central corridor was in semi-darkness. Not

until Skelir came to the area of the first sensor was he suddenly bathed in bright light. The corridor was straight and the Fantan looked at the dark sections ahead that disappeared in the twilight.

He soon reached the place where a few small, airworthy transport robots were stored; practical leftovers from the last-but-one world they had visited. All of the old one-man antigrav platforms for moving about the ship fast had been replaced with them.

Skelir tried to remember the name of the world of origin, but it just didn't come. In any case, the niches for the cleaning robots had been modified specially by the builders on board so that the transport robots had enough space. "Dostis" was what the inventors in the last-but-one world had called the small machines, he remembered. But what was the name of the planet itself?

No matter.

He got on to a dosti and sank down into the passenger seat. Some modifications had been necessary to adapt the units to the needs of a Fantan, but it had been done excellently.

"Visitor hall," he said, naming his destination and switching on both the heating function and care mode with a routine movement.

The dosti took off as cool water vapor steered by variable jets cleaned Skelir's fine scales. Tiny symbiont animals, barely the size of bacteria, made sure his circulation worked perfectly. The old saying that equated a lot of Besun with many pleasures was certainly true.

A new section of the corridor in front of him lit up. Because Skelir was proceeding fast, light after light jumped on at very short intervals as he flew into each sensor detection area, until the dosti finally floated into a vertical shaft. The antigrav effect drew him down to the lowest level.

The transport robot finished its cleaning while still in the shaft and switched to vibration mode for a few seconds. Skelir increased the intensity and enjoyed this last minute of peace and quiet before he had to deal with these—what were they called again?—Terranians.

Although this was quite a new name that the inhabitants had been calling themselves only recently, the term turned up in an endless number of radio and news messages. The entire planet was in upheaval at the moment, and the ridiculous single-state governments were fighting one another in a complex network of

intrigues and open conflicts. And yet the inhabitants of this planet thought very highly of themselves, and only because they had found a little Arkonide technology to play with. Botchers! The Fantan were far more advanced than they were.

Skelir exited the antigrav shaft on the hoverbot, raced towards the visitors hall, and took over the steering himself shortly before his destination. He maneuvered the machine into the last possible niche in the middle of the planted area, got off, stretched himself, and was once again amazed by how good the dosti cleanup had done him. He felt refreshed and alive, and it even seemed to him as if his scales were absorbing the essential oils from the air better than usual.

Rokarn was already waiting in front of the port that led into the visitor hall. “May much Besun come to you,” he said, citing the old blessing and greeting, but in a tone of voice that meant he wished him the exact opposite. His next words sounded a lot more honest, “It’s about time you turned up! I can’t go until you relieve me.”

“I know the rules!” Skelir felt as if he was once again communicating with the soulless ship’s Positronic, which dampened his spirits considerably. “I couldn’t make it any sooner. Where is Jenves?”

“Where do you think? In the hall with the others.”

“Five people are on board, right?”

“Four. One of them was not Besun.”

“Why was I not informed of that?”

The hollows that Rokarn used for vision narrowed. “How should I know? I’m off now.”

“May much...”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rokarn hurried away and climbed onto the dosti that Skelir had parked for his return without asking permission. The most amazing adventure was awaiting him.

Unlike Skelir. But he would try and make the best of his situation and not think about the disgust he felt for himself. Skelir, the deformed one, who was scared of what it was that defined every Fantan at the very core of his being.

He passed through the port, which always made sure the required decontamination took place when Besun came into the ship from outside.

Right after that, he looked into the face of a human being for the very first time. Their appearance, he thought to himself, was

one of extreme ugliness, like all such life forms. Arkonides were no better in that respect, but they at least had the decency to cover the largest part of their disgusting skull with hair...unlike these humans. Especially the one they clearly considered to be their leader. All he wore on his head was some red fluff, like a newborn bird but less fleecy. Skelir actually liked birds; one of them had been his best-ever Besun. But he found these Terranians unlikeable from the very start.

His eyes wandered over to the smallest inhabitant of this planet. He faltered. According to the typical humanoid characteristics, this was a female child, but it differed from its companions. It was missing something.

Just like me... He, Skelir, had only four extremities, and this girl had only one arm, unlike the other humans with their ugly bodies, which were symmetrical down the middle axis.

Exactly what he was going to do with this realization, he did not know, but it made him interested in this girl. And in his feeling of disgust.

Perhaps it was good that he had lost the selection game and had been damned to be left behind on guard duty. Maybe it was better than racing out across the planet in a craft.

Maybe he would find the best Besun of his life right here.

6.

Rico:
Remembering and renewal

I completely assimilated the cadaver of the wild Asian ass. Unlike with the insects, I only managed a recovery rate of just below 97 percent, but I was happy. A little dust from the boney parts remained, and I drew out every last drop of moisture from them and used a simple material conversion to obtain some amino acids and roughage.

My physical regeneration was proceeding well. The autorepair mechanisms were able to work at a pretty low level, and most of them, once activated, ran more or less on their own. The biological foreign matter transformed to become flesh, and you couldn't tell it apart from human flesh. The internal network of veins came together to form a very fine web throughout most of my body. Its connection to my lung system was about to be completed.

Fine adjustments still had to be made to the organic part of my brain, but that was to be expected. This was where the most difficulties lay because of the high degree of complexity of the underlying structure.

At first, I remained standing motionless in the middle of the desert sand. My memory recovered a wealth of information out of the depths. Some people described the barren stoney deserts of the Gobi as *han-hai,* which basically meant something like *dry lake.* The dried out sandy areas were known as *Shamo* in the local Chinese language, which caused a change in the language among the youngest generation, who called the Gobi by this name. A group of local historians and linguists had campaigned to prevent the government from making this the official designation. Even the names of the professors who had played a major role in this popped back into my memory.

Unimportant stuff.

I must manage to filter the relevant information out of the overall mass of data. That will probably not be possible until my biobrain is

activated and the synchronous link-up to my memory unit takes place. That's what I'm hoping will happen based on previous experience.

Several hours passed and I converted the brightness and warmth of the sun into energy. I used it to produce oxygen in the cardiac chambers of my robotic heart using my internal circulation. The oxygen spread throughout my body via the network of veins and my neuroplexus. However, I was still not able to kindle the activity of the individual cells. The analysis showed that a fundamental substance was missing at the molecular genetic level.

I thought about this. Han-hai, the dry lake. There actually were real lakes in some parts of the Gobi. Salt lakes. The Juyan was undoubtedly the best-known salt lake on the entire planet at present after the *Stardust* had used it as a landing site upon its return from the Moon. With some luck, a salt lake would contain the right basic substances needed to complete my regeneration.

The Juyan salt lake itself was out of the question, as the risk of being detected there was too big. Using the position of a star that was currently not visible to the human eye, I calculated my exact location and started moving towards my destination. The closest salt lake was tiny and nameless with a surface area of 0.02 square kilometers. More than enough. Whether I would find what I needed there, however, remained to be seen.

I marched off in the direction of the mini salt lake, picking up some stones along the way, using their material to refine some of my metallic organs. My wiring became more stable. A dried-out bush, which had obviously been rolling about the desert floor for years, provided me with some atomic mass that I was able to convert into energy. My regeneration process was going quite nicely.

Night came, followed by the next morning—a new day, and out of the darkness a new memory suddenly appeared that seemed to be more important than others: the planet Venus and a complex known as the refuge. That was the place where I had woken up the first time after—after an unspecified time. Disguised as an Arkonide, I had encountered a woman named Thora and her companion, Tamika.

A tiny salt lake appeared before me. Would I find the elements I required for life here? The water sparkled reddish and green beneath the strong sunlight. I stepped towards the lake and felt something that was deeply confusing to me—and proof that the

adjustments to my biotechnical hybrid existence had a long way to go before they would be complete. A sharp pain shot through me, coming from my feet, or more accurately, the soles of my feet.

I stepped backwards, sat down on the stony shore and looked at the source of my pain. A deep cut had torn open my skin and flesh, which had only just formed. As no blood was yet flowing in the now fully completed veins, no valuable biomass was lost as a result of my injury.

I touched the wound carefully. The flesh felt warm from its contact to the overheated ground and damp from the saltwater of the lake. I pushed the edges of the wound together and my healing system very quickly reconnected them. There was a squidgy sound as a little pus exited the wound.

I had made a stupid mistake. The bottom of the salt lake was full of sharp crystals. I needed shoes for protection, but simple items like that were simply not available to me. However, I would be able to find the brine shrimps I needed in the middle of the lake, where the water was very deep. So I had no choice. Making sure to block my pain center, I walked into the lake.

Data memory recall Rico, reactivation phase: The brine shrimp, or the Artemia Salina, is the only higher organism that can survive in a salt lake. It grows to a size of one to two centimeters and becomes redder in color depending on the salt content of the water. In the form of multicellular cysts, it can become inactive for many years in a dry, oxygen-free environment.

The soles of my feet were shredded, and the flesh hung from the bones, but that did not bother me. It would regenerate itself easily enough. Much more important was the fact that I had found the badly needed brine shrimp and had been able to assimilate a large quantity of them. Several bundles of the cysts supplied me with the necessary basic substances for life in a highly nutritious form.

I stored them in my biomass-technology interfaces, enclosed them in an airtight shell, and created a small vacuum again and again. The life energy from the brine shrimp now existed in the special biological niche that made this creature unique. An unusual but effective way to run information through the biotechnical distributor: half alive, half dead. Half machine, half living creature. Just like myself.

I now possessed all the basic substances I needed. Satisfied, I

left the salt lake, checked my healing process, and closed my body's still open circulatory systems. The organic brain activated itself and merged with the memory unit. My heart began to beat, pumping freshly formed blood through my veins.

The first question I had asked myself from the very beginning of my new existence was answered within the single blink of an eye: I *was* somebody. I thought, therefore I existed. I not only had a name, I was a person. A conglomerate of technology and biology, a mixture of machine and living creature. I was Rico.

A second later my memory was also complete, and I could remember the time after I had woken up in the Venus Refuge. I had come to Earth with the Arkonide woman Thora—*back* to Earth. I had helped her and had been killed in the process. Deactivated. Destroyed. In the end, all that was left were my smoldering individual components, which had ultimately ended up in my hiding place in the desert.

And yet, as clear as all this was in my mind, that was as far as it went. My memory remained fragmented and incomplete. What had come before that? How had I come to be at the Venus Refuge? I knew again that I had a duty to fulfill, for me and for...*him*. That was the actual purpose of my existence.

But I was unable to name this task or the goal it was supposed to achieve. The longer I thought about it, the more fuzzy it became in my mind. But at the same time, a longing grew in me—pulling me towards the sea. For that was where fulfillment awaited me.

7.

A stroll in Vega
Perry Rhodan

He looked back. The *Good Hope* was floating a few meters away —a metallic, spherical colossus in outer space. Several areas of damage that the mutant Ivan Goratschin had caused, especially on the outer shell, were still clearly visible as deformations or as small cracks in the outer shell that could not be seen from the inside.

However, the Arkonide auxiliary craft paled to insignificance in comparison to the huge fiery ball of the Vega sun that Rhodan could just see alongside the spaceship out of the corner of his eye. In reality, it was millions of kilometers away.

The Terrans accelerated their battledresses. The ship, his only home within a circle of almost thirty light years and an island of life, shrank away from him at a very fast pace and was soon no larger than a fingernail, hardly recognizable—a nothingness here in the middle of the endless expanse of outer space.

Rhodan turned to look in the direction of his companions. It was agreed that they should stay close together, a maximum of five meters apart. He was the only one who had already flown in an Arkonide battledress before this mission, and yet he considered it no less a technical miracle than Daria Morozova, Anne Sloane, and Ras Tschubai did.

At first glance the outfits looked clumsy and were designed in a completely different way from Earthly spacesuits, but there was at least some similarity on a basic visual level. An Arkonide battledress weighed fifty kilograms when worn as long as the wearer didn't fly using the anti-grav function. The heavy weight mainly resulted from the high-powered energy reserves that could project a fully functional protective shield for a limited amount of time, among other things.

The integrated pulsator drive also allowed for a flight range of up to twenty thousand kilometers under Earth-like conditions,

which was why the *Good Hope* had flown up to a distance of around three thousand meters from the rescue capsule. After that, the suits could fly them to their destination in only a few seconds.

The battledress's Positronic could be steered intuitively, and the Russian cosmonaut Daria Morozova proved to be highly skilled at operating it from the very beginning. That was not the case for Sloane and Tschubai, who were having some difficulty getting the hang of it. They had therefore switched their suits to automatic mode, allowing them to be steered by Rhodan's own impulses. In this way, he was able to direct the two mutants through space. They didn't want to switch over to independent controls again until they reached the rescue capsule of the shipwrecked inhabitants of Vega.

When—or *if*—they returned to Terrania, Rhodan would have to think precisely about who he could train in the practical use of this technology. It would be vital to have a team of experts at his side in the future who were specialized in a number of areas.

"Is everything okay?" he asked his companions using the radio function integrated into their helmets.

"All fine," Morozova replied.

Ras Tschubai also gave the okay, followed shortly by Anne Sloane, whose voice was shaking.

"If you're feeling sick, you should..."

"No," the telekinetic interrupted. "It's about that."

She pointed behind Tschubai. Rhodan directed his eyes to where she was indicating and froze. Behind them was the fourth planet of the solar system which, according to Thora's information, was only sparsely populated. It was so huge that Tschubai looked like a paper cut-out against it. And next to him, one of the filigree ships of the defense force was under attack.

The entire scene was playing out in the ghostly silence of outer space. Energy discharges flashed all around the ship. Its protective shield shimmered and flickered, and blue fingers of light shot out like the flares of a sun only to disappear immediately.

Rhodan used the battledress's scanner, which told him the tragic scene was taking place almost a thousand kilometers away. He heard the heavy breathing of the telekinetic and spoke loudly into his helmet microphone.

"We're safe, Anne. We're not even a speck of dust for that ship."

"It looks so close."

She still had not grown accustomed to the clear view provided

by the vacuum in space. It was an environment that was confusing at first to the untrained eye, because it created conditions that were completely different to those in Earth's atmosphere.

The small rescue troop flew on. The battledress computer knew the precise position of the rescue capsule, taking its orbit into consideration. The tiny, far too fragile metal shell soon appeared before them.

Before they reached it, Rhodan turned round and looked one last time. At exactly that moment, the protective shield of the besieged unit broke. The long shell of the ship burst in a gigantic explosion. Tongues of flame danced on the escaping atmosphere coming from the vessel and were stifled by the vacuum.

Rhodan felt a sense of sheer horror. Numerous individuals had just perished before his eyes. He was, however, on a mission with his partners to save at least one inhabitant of Vega. Or perhaps a handful, if several of them had made it onto the capsule. It did not look like it could hold many. It was also egg-shaped and had a diameter of only five meters.

Rhodan released Sloane and Tschubai from their linked-up steering system just before they arrived. The four Terrans floated in space. Only one thing counted now: getting inside. The team established direct contact with each other.

"Ras," Rhodan said, "it's your call."

Ras Tschubai

It was anything but easy to float in space and prepare for a targeted teleportation. Although it was only a distance of a few meters, he had to take three people with him—not to mention four Arkonide battlesuits with a total weight of around two hundred kilograms.

Tschubai tried his best, but he couldn't do it. He didn't have enough strength. He managed to jump himself, but his companions were left behind.

He looked around confused. He was standing in a tiny room between machines, metal blocks and aggregate blocks that covered every millimeter of the walls and even the ceiling. He estimated the diameter of the room with the slightly rounded outer walls to be just under three meters.

Considering the measurements of the small, egg-shaped capsule as a whole, the teleporter guessed that this machine room made up

the complete lower half of the craft. While the entire technology of the rescue capsule was kept there, he found himself in a kind of emergency room that was meant for refugees.

There was no artificial gravity around him. He realized only after getting his bearings that his Arkonide battledress was not standing on the floor but floating several centimeters above it.

He communicated via his suit's radio with Rhodan who, outside the capsule, was still wondering what had happened to the teleporter.

"I'm sorry. I would normally have managed the distance with all of us. It must have been the conditions out here in space. And my nervousness."

"Are you inside the craft? Can you see any of the crew?"

Tschubai offered some brief information about the setup inside the capsule and his current position.

"Jump up to the upper room and see if anyone is still alive," Rhodan suggested. "If you need any help..."

"Then I'll fetch one of you. I can certainly jump if I take only one of you with me." *Even now.*

He signed off and teleported once again. His surroundings changed from one second to the next. Instead of technology, he was looking into the face of a dead being. Its eyes were open, and the right half of its body was badly burned. The undamaged skin, just like the face, was a deep blue.

He stared at the figure as if hypnotized. Apart from the color of its skin, the body could have been human, a well-fed man, as far as Tschubai could tell. He was sitting in a seat, held in position by a belt running across his upper thigh. The surface of the seat was a cheap-looking, grayish-brown plastic.

Neither the belt nor the seat had suffered the slightest damage. The blue-skinned man must have sustained his terrible burns before entering the capsule. It was a wonder he had survived long enough to seek out the rescue craft.

The teleporter had trouble tearing himself away, but he had to see what he had bumped against. It was the back of a second seat. The being sitting there must also have been dead, otherwise it would have reacted in some way to the teleporter's sudden appearance. However, Tschubai could see no external injuries.

He used a voice command to ask his battledress's Positronic about the air content of the craft and found out that the oxygen

level was very low. There was a tiny leak, hardly bigger than the head of a pin, that was letting oxygen out into space. According to information provided by Thora, the people of the Vega system lived in atmospheres with oxygen like humans did. Perhaps this stranger had suffocated horribly in the rescue craft while waiting to be saved.

There was no third person in the capsule; the last seat was empty.

"Mission failed," Tschubai told his companions. "Two extraterrestrials in the capsule. Both are—" He stopped mid-sentence.

"Ras?" Sloane asked. "What's up?"

The Sudanese teleporter stared at the second corpse. Or at the man he had thought to be dead. The blue fingers were moving slightly. A word in a language Tschubai did not understand was formed by the lips of the blue-skinned man, hardly more than a whisper. His mouth was half-open. He lifted his hand as if in slow motion and held it to his throat. His mouth opened even wider.

It was obvious to Tschubai that the stranger was trying to get some air so that he would not suffocate. He had probably been unconscious before and had been woken up by Tschubai's appearance before succumbing to a terrible death.

The teleporter had no time to lose, and he would have to place all his bets on one card. He contacted Thora. "Give me the exact position of the *Good Hope*!"

Luckily, the Arkonide woman did not ask any unnecessary questions. She had no doubt realized from the tone of his voice that it was urgent.

"I'll transmit the position data continuously from now on to your suit's Positronic. The *Good Hope* is currently exactly 3,129 meters from the capsule."

Three kilometers. That was a very large distance. But if Tschubai did not succeed with this jump, the alien would die. The man needed oxygen—immediately. The only place he could get it was on the *Good Hope*. And if they didn't get there fast, he was facing a miserable death by asphyxiation.

Tschubai made direct physical contact by placing his finger on the palm of the stranger's hand. He studied the information about the position of the *Good Hope*, which was updating every second, and which his suit's Positronic was projecting onto the inside of his

visor.

The teleporter concentrated. Even the tiniest deviation from his goal could mean instant death for the stranger. Nobody could survive unprotected in the vacuum of outer space. However, inside the *Good Hope*, the stranger had a chance.

It was all or nothing. Tschubai tried to muster what strength he had—and teleported.

8.

Besun
Skelir

The human with the short red fluff emphasized that it was polite in his culture for strangers to tell each other their names. “My name is Bull,” he said afterwards. “Reginald Bull.”

Skelir then heard the designations Eric Manoli and Sid González, but he gave these individuals nothing more than a passing glance. Only the child was interesting to him. The *incomplete* child, so strange and yet so similar to him. Just as “wrong” as he was.

“Sue Mirafiore,” she said, introducing herself.

“As a sign of our good will, we would like to follow this custom in your world, even if it is ineffective and quite impossible.” After this introduction, which exposed his typical awkwardness, Jenves revealed his identity. “This is the colleague who will be staying behind on guard duty with me. His name is Skelir.”

“Can we see more of this ship before we continue talking?” the human named Bull asked.

Skelir recognized, when the scales around Jenves’s hearing opening bristled, that he wanted to fulfill this request, and he spoke quickly. “This hall is designed specially for visitors. We would like to complete the necessary formalities here.”

“Should we jump in farther?” the Terran named Sid González asked. He was a pathetically skinny being and looked even worse than his companions.

Bull turned his ugly head section in a fast rhythm from his left to his right shoulder and back again. According to the cultural studies that had preceded the landing of the *Sregar-Nakut*, this gesture, which the Fantan considered to be unnecessarily cumbersome, symbolized “no” on this planet.

All the time, Skelir was asking himself what the young being called González meant by his words. *Jump?* He was not clear on what status this Terran held. He did not seem to be a child, but he

was also not a mature human—obviously in some intermediate stage that corresponded to the Fantan phase of mid-maturity.

Skelir had no wish to think about it any longer. He directed his seeing holes at Sue Mirafiore and opened them wider. “You are incomplete,” he said, not beating about the bush. “You’re missing something.”

Sue raised her right hand and laid it on the stump of her left arm, which ended just below her shoulder. By doing so, she was obviously trying to hide from the eyes of the Fantan, although the remainder of her arm was covered by her clothes anyway. Her entire face seemed to have turned to stone, as she said, “Yes.” This was followed by a low hissing sound as she let out her breath. Not a second later, she added, “But luckily I’m only missing one limb.”

Skelir realized with surprise that, according to the emotions analysis of the translator, Sue was annoyed, but not disgusted.

“An interesting answer.”

The girl had quickly understood and realized that Skelir was also maimed. That kind of understanding was something not to be taken for granted, considering she did not have much experience in dealing with alien peoples. What was more, considering how different their appearances were, one Fantan must look like every other Fantan to her. That was a kind of ignorance he experienced again and again among humanoid peoples.

“How did you lose your arm?” he asked.

Something twitched in Sue’s face. A low noise that sounded like she was gnashing her teeth could be heard out of her closed mouth.

“That’s a question she does not want to, nor can she, answer!” the young human named Sid González yelled.

“It’s irrelevant.” Reginald Bull stated.

Skelir accepted it and decided he would refrain from telling them his own story. Nevertheless, he hoped that he would have the opportunity to talk to Sue undisturbed at some point. Absolutely disgusting, and yet...

He pulled himself out of his reverie. An encounter should not be problematic. After all, who would prevent him from making it happen? For the time-being, he turned to the man who described himself as Bull. “So, as you have assumed the position of spokesperson, I assume you are the leader of the humans, am I right?”

“Yes,” Bull answered, without hesitating for a second.

The Fantan made a game out of asking him more questions, as if he were actually interested in the answers. “Where are you leading them?”

This time Bull did hesitate, obviously looking for a suitable answer.

Before he found one, Skelir asked, “What is your title, honorable leader of the humanoids who call themselves Terrans?”

Bull brought his hands together and intertwined the fingers. “System admin...” he said quietly before shaking his head and saying, this time in a determined tone of voice, “The Great Administrator.”

“How great?” Skelir immediately wanted to know.

“What’s all this nonsense about?” Sid González yelled. “These questions are ridiculous!” Sparks were dancing in front of his body. It looked as if they were spraying directly out of his fingertips.

A highly interesting discovery. With a casual gesture, no doubt meaningless to the humans, Skelir drew Jenves’s attention to the sparks. The other, in turn, made clear that he had noticed them and had already arranged for an energy measurement to be carried out. The Fantan was highly interested in what the results would show. After all, when on guard duty, you have to consider a great many things and be ready for anything.

“May I once again request that we be allowed to see other parts of the ship?” Reginald Bull asked. “Or, if that is not desired, may we ask you some more questions? For example, why the *Sregar-Nakut* landed on Earth and why your auxiliary craft flew off in all directions. We know nothing about the Fantan and—”

“Okay,” Skelir interrupted him. He had no desire to waste his time on such nonsense. Who did the Besun think they were? Did a bovine calf want an explanation about why it was going to be slaughtered? Or did a cabbage ask why it was being eaten? However, Reginald Bull had formulated an acceptable way out without noticing. “We will show you our ship.”

Was he only imagining it or did Bull look satisfied with himself?

Reginald Bull

Bull was satisfied. Under the circumstances, he saw it as an acceptable success that he had managed, with a simple trick, to persuade the Fantan to give them a tour of the ship. Skelir had

certainly taken the bait that Bull had laid down for him easily enough.

What the alien referred to as a *hall for visitors*, turned out, when one considered the overall size of the spindle ship, to be more of a small, unused storeroom. Dull gray metal walls formed the interior of a cube, the edges of which were around six meters long.

There were deep scratches in the floor before the exterior bulkhead, as if an animal had dragged its claws across it with such force that they had even bored into the metal. The only other thing that caught Bull's attention was the passage into the main part of the ship. There was a door with no visible opening mechanism, and the two Fantan took their visitors to it.

The door slid to the side automatically when Skelir approached it, opening up into an intermediate space. "This is the airlock chamber that is used for decontamination," Jenves explained. "You will feel nothing. For obvious reasons, all Besun must pass through a corresponding protective facility."

"What is *Besun?"* Bull had no hope of receiving an answer to his question. After only a brief period of contact, it was very clear that this term was of central importance to the Fantan. More than that, it seemed to be absolutely pivotal to their entire existence. As he expected, the two extraterrestrials completely ignored him.

The entrance to the airlock closed behind them, and at the same time a quiet humming noise could be heard, accompanied by an intense flash of blue light, before the exit opened on the other side. Behind that was a corridor that was the absolute opposite of what they had referred to as the visitor's hall.

Plants were growing proliferously from thousands of holders, and they had leaves that Bull had never seen before. Blue, red, yellow, even deep black, mixed with bright white and a color—Bull wasn't even sure if it could be called such—that escaped his perception and left him feeling dizzy.

In between the leaves were flowers as bright as neon tubes. When Sid bent down towards one of these glaring blossoms, its light went out, and it took on a dull gray coloring, looking as if it had wilted. A few gray flakes even floated down to the floor like ash.

Sue sighed in disappointment. The sight seemed to have a disconcertingly hard impact on her.

"Do you like the Shy Starfighter Lily?" Skelir asked her. "Only a few specimens still exist."

The girl looked scared, and she grabbed Sid and pulled him back a step with her. A blink of an eye later, the gray of the petals illuminated brightly once again.

"It's pretty," Sue replied. "Stunningly beautiful." Slowly she reached out, and this time the flower did not go out as her hand approached it but opened its blossom even further.

A high, singing tone that sounded something like a glockenspiel suddenly rang out, and pollen began to dance through the air.

Sue smiled.

"Move back," Eric Manoli called out. "We don't know whether __"

"The Starfighter Lily isn't dangerous," Sue said.

Skelir rushed to her side and grabbed her with one of his arm extremities. He pulled her with him, but Sue resisted and protested. When the Fantan grabbed her even more tightly, the girl tripped and fell with the stump of her missing arm against his fine-scaled cylindrical body. She groaned and twisted in the alien's clutches.

Sid was immediately at their side and, in a loud and threatening tone, hissed, "Let her go!"

"Sid," Bull said harshly. He could imagine only too well that the boy, in his sudden fit of anger, might attack the Fantan with his bare fists—or perhaps even with a knife or similar weapon, if he had smuggled something like that on board. You could never be sure of anything when it came to Sid, and Bull wanted to avoid an escalation of that kind at all cost. "Please, Skelir, we're not looking for trouble."

The extraterrestrial loosened his grasp and moved away from Sue. "There is no serious risk. The Shy Starfighter Lily can, however, have a slightly hypnotic effect due to its mesmerizing pollen. And the sensitive nature of the humanoid peoples reacts especially strongly to it. We are not particularly susceptible to it."

"Why do you have them on board, then?" Sid's question sounded like an accusation.

Bull knew the answer before it was spoken out loud. *"Besun,"* Jenves said, as expected.

After that everyone fell silent, and they moved on. They passed by a wide empty niche in the wall. The various plants around them gave off very different scents that mixed to create a potpourri that made them feel dizzy. Some were sweet like chocolate, while others smelled unpleasant like rancid butter or rotten fish.

“What did he feel like when you fell on him?” Bull heard Sid whisper.

Sue hesitated before answering. “Oily,” she said, but she didn’t sound particularly convinced. “Like a snake.”

“Snakes are dry and rough.”

Sue took a deep breath. “Then like how I imagine a snake to feel.”

At some point, the row of plants ended, and all at once the wall itself was covered in a type of fern. The leaves covered almost the entire surface area of several meters, with the metal only protruding every now and again. In this area, the air smelled fresh, almost as if they were standing at the seaside. All that was missing was the taste of salt on their lips.

Skelir, who was ahead of the rest of them, suddenly turned to the side, and a door that Bull had not noticed before slid open with a slight hissing sound. The small group followed Skelir’s invitation to enter, and a second later Bull thought he had been transported to a bizarre wonderland. They were standing in a warehouse, not unlike the room they had been brought through when entering the ship. However, the walls here were covered with shelves, and nearly every centimeter of floor space was covered with glass display cabinets. There was very little free space between them, just wide enough to allow the cylindrical body of a Fantan to pass through.

“I don’t believe it!” Sid whispered, and Reginald Bull, suddenly understanding what the mysterious word Besun meant.

Skelir

While the four Terrans entered the room, a message came in, and whatever it said plunged Skelir into a state of confusion.

Rokarn was calling him using the on-board radio system and receivers implanted in Skelir. It was Rokarn who he had lost the game to. “There is still a delay with the launch of the last craft. To be more precise, it is completely out of order due to wear and tear in the drive. The only alternative is a one-man craft without automatic steering. Level four required.”

He did not need to say more. Skelir understood exactly what he was getting at. “And as you only have level three...”

“I’m relinquishing my place and assuming guard duty. You owe me one.”

Skelir saw things differently, but he kept it to himself. Rokarn was not someone you could talk to. Apart from that, he didn't know whether he should see it as a piece of good luck, because his fear returned almost immediately. Nevertheless, he did not have to think it over for a second and did not hesitate in answering.

"I accept your offer. From now on you and Jenves share the responsibility for the safety of the Besun visitors."

"There was never any talk of safety."

Skelir thought about the girl Sue and the stump where her arm should have been. "New orders," he stated.

Rokarn asked no further questions, but he broke off radio contact. It was easy for him. He was able to live a completely normal life. He didn't know what it meant to be maimed and to feel a fear of the Besun that was only equaled by his respect and longing for them. Skelir allowed Jenves to pass by him and enter the hall like the four humans, while he remained standing where he was.

It was important to weigh up all his options very carefully. What should happen next? With this situation, with the girl Sue Mirafiore? He thought up a plan and stepped up to the visitors, determined.

"The conditions for guard duty have changed. I have to briefly leave the *Sregar-Nakut*. Jenves will act as my deputy, and Rokarn will be taking my place until I return."

The human named Reginald Bull was standing in front of the first display cabinet with his arms stretched out to the sides. "What is all this supposed to be? And why did you send out all those auxiliary craft? What are you people planning? I want an answer!"

"You forget who and what you are!" Skelir's partner on guard duty said, admonishing him as if he were a schoolchild.

"Really? Who and what am I, then?" He looked at his companions. "Perhaps we should leave the ship."

"Do you really believe that is possible?" Jenves issued an order, and a combat robot came out of a niche at the opposite end of the hall. He did not have to activate his weapon—the message was clear enough as it was.

At first Skelir thought the fluffy hair on Bull's head was fluffing up even more, but then he realized the face of the human had turned a darker color, which looked quite strange in combination with his red hair. "What's that supposed to mean?" Bull yelled. He was obviously an easily excitable man. "Are you threatening us?

Are you holding us prisoner?"

"You are Besun."

The color of Bull's ugly face darkened and became an even more intense shade of red. "I'm sick of hearing that word!"

"Should I..." the young Terran Sid González began.

"Best be quiet, Sid," Eric Manoli interrupted him. "And you, too, Reg! Nobody is threatening us directly. I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding. Don't you think so too?"

For a second, sparks danced and sizzled in front of the young Terran's body. They had already dissipated before they reached the ground, with only one or two hopping around the floor, seemingly weightless. A highly strange phenomenon. Definitely something to keep an eye on. First of all the girl, Sue, and now this. This planet, whose inhabitants had simply called it *Earth* until recently, had some very interesting surprises in store.

"You may move around the ship freely," Jenves told them. "Almost everywhere. You will surely understand that certain areas are private. I am sure that is no different in your own buildings."

Skelir was amused by his guard-duty partner's choice of words. Private areas. As if he cared about that! However, it was clear that Jenves—just like himself—had prepared himself well. In most of the subcultures of this planet's inhabitants, the concept of a private sphere played a significant role. It was practically sacred to them, even if their information networks did not exactly give that impression. What a strange, contradictory people they were.

Jenves's well-chosen words paid off. Bull's temper had obviously subsided, and the others were acting calmly enough. Eric Manoli placed a hand on the shoulder of the young González. From where Skelir was standing, Sue was behind the two of them.

"Explore the ship," Jenves suggested. "The robot will accompany you, and he will help you if you encounter any problems."

"A *helpful* combat robot," Bull said with a growl. "These Fantan people seem to possess similar talents to our politicians. They are certainly very good at presenting everything in a duplicitous manner."

"However, you may not leave the ship," Skelir added, scrutinizing Sue Mirafiore continuously as he spoke. He felt the same fear he always felt when on a Besun hunt, but he also felt a sense of satisfaction about the fact that, despite his wretched

deformity, he at least behaved like a full-fledged Fantan during the hunt. And this time, there was a third emotion. He did not want to leave Sue behind, did not want to be separated from her before he had—gotten a hold of her secrets.

But he had no choice. “I’ll be back soon.” He turned to leave.

“Wait!” Bull called out. “As long as both of you are here. Skelir, one thing has to be cleared up. You are our—guardian. What are the auxiliary craft doing? The ones that sped off in all directions? It is important that I know, so that I can pass that information on. Otherwise you may run the risk of the leaders of the nations of our world overreacting.”

“Risk? For us?” Skelir was once again amazed by these humans. A very strange people indeed, even after all the planets they had already visited. “You have a completely mistaken assessment of the situation. But thank you for caring.”

Bull laughed, which the Fantan couldn’t quite get the measure of. “I would still like to have an answer,” the Terran said stubbornly. “What will the auxiliary craft...”

“You shall have your answer,” Skelir said on a whim. “I will also be leaving in an auxiliary craft now. Jenves will hand over a receiver device for you, which you can use to watch the video streams of my exterior camera.”

“Will we see what you see?” Sue asked.

“Yes. Or to be more precise, you will see what my ship *sees*.”

The humans said nothing.

“Are you satisfied now?” Skelir asked.

“It’s acceptable,” Bull replied. “Thank you. Where will you be flying to?”

“To the land you call India. Perhaps to the Rashtrapati Bhavan.”

“To the President’s Palace?”

“Is that not what I said?” Skelir left. The one-man craft was waiting for him...Besun...as was his terrible fear.

9.

Rico:
More than the feeling

The pull of the ocean was more than just the feeling of knowing the right direction and even stronger than the magnetic force of attraction. It must have something to do with my purpose, with my task. Something in my memory stirred and reacted without the necessary information actually reaching the conscious part of my understanding.

And yet I felt no doubt whatsoever. It was—intuition. A sense of faith that was stronger than actual knowledge.

I stood for a few more hours at the edge of the small salt lake while the last details of my human appearance perfected themselves. Tiny grooves in the skin of my fingertips. The complicated turns of my outer ears. A slight patina on the previously too perfect teeth. A discreet scar above the left eyebrow —left over from a typical children's disease.

Before I was able to follow my longing and go on the road, there was one last problem to solve. I could not manage to cover the long distance to my destination without outside help. According to the geographic information I had, I found myself 1,608 kilometers from the nearest coastline where I could sit down and look out on the sea. And as I had to rely on human support, I would not be able to remain naked.

Therefore, I bent down, carefully picked up a number of salt crystals from the floor of the lake, and placed them on the shore. I found some twigs, dried out and without any visible signs of life, between the nearby stones. With a little luck, there would still be a few encapsulated bacteria and microbes on them. I scraped a handful of sand together and calculated how much saltwater was needed for the synthesization process.

I finally began the procedure. Producing a suitable wardrobe took more than an hour of my time, but I was very satisfied with the results. One shortcoming, however, could not be eradicated. The

fabric remained joined to my body in some places, as that was the only way I was able to let it grow. The clothing *belonged to me*, and I would have to withdraw it into me and excrete the basic substances once I took it off.

But I had time. I began marching at a fast pace, a speed I would be able to keep up for at least twelve hours before my biological components required a break.

I was ready to mingle with the inhabitants of this world. Everything else would just happen. I would have to improvise. In my new existence as a human, I had many more opportunities on this planet than I had had when I was disguised as an Arkonide in the Venus Refuge.

The heat drifted across the rocky surface, which stretched out before me for kilometers.

I walked.

And I walked.

It was a pleasant feeling to be breathing again. My body even showed typical human reactions. Sweat ran in rivulets down my body. And my heart beat faster. However, I could have enjoyed all of these small details a lot more if my longing for the sea had not started becoming stronger and stronger. It gave rise to a feeling of unease in me, suppressing my ability to think objectively and logically. Hopefully that would get better once I was exposed to a number of other sensory stimuli. The monotony of the Gobi's rocky desert landscape did not provide many diversions.

So I walked.

And I walked.

The sun was already touching the horizon when I reached the asphalt ribbon of a road. It was in a terrible state. For as far as I could see, it was damaged in more than a dozen places, creating deep potholes in its surface.

I retrieved geographic data from my memory, as my biological brain was of no use to me in this respect. The information told me that I would have to head east to find a better, *faster* road that would bring me closer to my destination.

So I walked.

And I walked.

The air temperature had fallen considerably during the short phase of dusk. When a black blanket laid itself over everything, I generated an inner source of warmth by converting matter so that

the biological components of my body would not cool down too much.

I felt the hum and slight vibrations on the ground long before the light of the headlamps found me.

“Lucky for you!”

These words reached my face through the open passenger door accompanied by the bad breath of the driver.

“Thank you,” I replied, very much in keeping with the typical platitudes that were seen as politeness in this neck of the woods.

The driver of the truck looked like he was a hundred years old. “Climb in. On your way through the Gobi alone at this time of night? That doesn’t sound like a good idea to me! Where are your water reserves?”

“Ran out,” I lied, as I complied with his order and sat on the passenger seat. The last time I had seen water was at the salt lake. However, if need be, I could synthesize it myself.

With a humming noise I was not familiar with, the old man pressed a button on the steering wheel. A flap between the two seats opened to the side. Cold vapor rose out of it. “Help yourself.”

I reached into the mini refrigerator and took out one of the plastic packs of water that were piled up inside it. “Too kind of you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s a lonely stretch. In return, I hope you have something interesting to tell me. Otherwise you can start walking again.”

I had some difficulty opening the lid of the water container, which was remarkably illogical in its construction. The water contained far too much iron for a human body, but I could certainly use it. My systems integrated the elements after slightly reshaping them into fresh wiring connections where there were still fragments.

“By the way, my name is Takezo,” the driver said.

“Rico.”

“Strange name.”

I decided to answer with a smile. Let him interpret it any way he wanted.

“So, where are you from, Tico?”

He had obviously misheard me. I didn’t bother correcting him. “From the desert.”

Takezo responded with a grunting sound. “Oh yeah? I would

never have thought that. Right here, in the middle of the desert, on the only road, if you can even call this crappy strip of asphalt that."

I was thinking up another innocuous answer in my head, when he said, "You're from Terrania, then? One of the—don't get me wrong—crazy ones seeking their salvation there, and then realizing the people there pee stinking water just like the rest of us?"

The story was as good or as bad as any other. So I simply answered, "Yes."

"You could be a little more entertaining unless you want to walk again! Did you forget what I told you?"

"I was disappointed with Terrania," I lied. I guessed that was exactly what Takezo wanted to hear, for whatever reason. "I had expected something completely different."

This brought a wide grin to the driver's face. "If you ask me, they're all nutcases. The aliens should go back to where they came from! Back to space with them, that's what I say. Earth belongs to us! We don't need anyone from outside."

A strange, naive, and ignorant attitude. "Right."

Takezo then started on a monolog that I only had to add to by nodding every now and again. The driver obviously liked the sound of his own voice.

I looked out into the night, then I turned the conversation towards his destination and discovered to my great joy that he could bring me quite a bit closer to where I was heading. To a sea on whose shores...something was awaiting me.

Takezo scratched his head, shaking a hair off his fingers afterwards. "Damn! Now the hairs of my wig are falling out! My real hair is long gone, and now this! I've had cancer for years, you know." He laughed loudly. "That just goes to show how strong that crappy chemotherapy is, if it's even making my artificial hair fall out!"

I laughed along with him, based on a sober cost-benefit analysis, because I wanted to keep traveling with him for some time, and I didn't want to get on the wrong side of him. Only one thing mattered: I was getting closer to the sea. Slowly, but surely.

10.

Bringing back the light
Thora

Ras Tschubai materialized right in front of Thora. He gasped, pressed both hands tightly against his temples, and staggered forward, then collapsed, falling right through the middle of the strategic holo. Symbols scattered across his face, lit up his dark skin, and danced on his hair. Then he hit the ground.

The Arkonide woman saw that Conrad Deringhouse was taking care of him. That was good, and it left her to look after the newcomer—the shipwrecked stranger, a humanoid with blue skin and a stocky stature, who had appeared out of nowhere with Tschubai. Before the jump, he had obviously been in a sitting position, meaning he had only fallen a few centimeters before hitting the floor. His hands were grabbing his throat, his mouth wide open, and he was gasping for air.

Thora bent over the alien at the very same moment Tako Kakuta knelt down next to him. “Lack of air, unable to breathe properly” he said, diagnosing the obvious.

“He almost suffocated,” Tschubai said in a flat tone. He was obviously feeling better than appearances would suggest. At least he was conscious. The long jump had no doubt drained him temporarily.

“Was there an oxygen atmosphere in the rescue capsule?” Thora called out to him. “Quick, I need an answer, Mister Tschubai! Our air could be just as poisonous for him!”

“Oxygen...same as us.” The teleporter’s words were replaced by a coughing fit.

“Lie down,” Conrad Deringhouse told him.

Kakuta loosened the stranger’s hands from his neck. “You are safe here,” he explained, although he was certain the newcomer didn’t understand him. He hoped the blue-skinned man would be aware of his calm, friendly tone. Thora joined him and repeated the

words in Arkonide.

The stranger sucked air in sharply. His dark eyes turned in their sockets. When he tried to sit up, he kept sinking back down again. His hands came to his chest.

"Like a human who feels pain there and is worried he might have a problem with his heart," Kakuta said. "I have never encountered a member of this species, but he seems to be astoundingly similar to us."

"Don't jump to any hasty conclusions," Thora warned. "The movement could mean something completely different."

Ras Tschubai came towards them. Still shaky on his feet, he was supported by Deringhouse. "Will he...survive?"

"As long as he doesn't have any internal injuries, it's likely. However, I am unfamiliar with his people, so my superficial assessment may turn out to be wrong. They obviously know about space travel, yet I've never heard of them."

Kakuta nodded. "Perhaps their spaceships never achieved the ability to fly faster than light, so they only settled the planets of their own solar system." He lowered his eyes and shook his head lightly.

"What's wrong?" asked Thora.

"Only. What a ridiculous thing to say!" the Japanese man cried. "It's a great deal more than our people have managed to date. We would never have reached this solar system without your help."

All further discussion ceased as the shipwrecked stranger used both hands to push himself up from the floor and settle into a sitting position. He was still breathing heavily and his lips were shaking. Words came out of his mouth, a collection of incomprehensible syllables with a harsh sound and many explosive vowels.

"Keep talking," Thora said to him. "The more you talk, the faster the translators can analyze your language and start translating it." She hoped he felt encouraged to talk further despite the language barrier. With a little luck, his people were familiar with translation technology and he had a device with him. Translators could have very different forms. For example, integrated into the small chain the stranger wore on a strap on his uniform, the end of which disappeared into his pocket.

The shipwrecked man spat out more words and sentences. As he spoke, his eyes flickered quickly between Thora and Kakuta. At

one point his gaze moved to Ras Tschubai and he laid his hands diagonally on top of one another to form a hollow with both his thumbs standing up straight above it. This was possibly a gesture of gratitude towards the man who had saved his life.

The teleporter resumed radio contact with the other members of the team outside, informing them of the jump and the reason for it. Rhodan, Anne Sloane, and Daria Morozova immediately started to make their way back to the *Good Hope* in their spacesuits.

Everything is changing, Thora thought to herself. *Rhodan, as stubborn as he is, will not give up until he knows more about the background of this war.* She even understood his motivation for it. He was afraid that the aggressors, with their position of superior power, might soon attack his own solar system. And such a conclusion was not without justification, she had to admit.

Time would tell what the shipwrecked man knew and whether the bold rescue action had paid off. Of course, they had saved a life, a single member of an unfamiliar people. At the same time, out there in space, the orgy of violence and destruction continued unabated. The attackers were increasingly demonstrating their superiority over the defending force. Ship after ship exploded, sending its crew into oblivion.

Thora had already activated special rangefinders to find out more about the spaceships and the technology of the aggressors. But the results were coming in slowly, and the analyses were taking time. The Arkonide cursed the damage the *Good Hope* had suffered; in a modern, operational ship from her people, they would already have known the most urgent details. Not so in this 10,000-year-old auxiliary craft, which was not much more than a flying piece of junk and yet still a technological marvel to the others on board.

The solar system's defenders were meanwhile withdrawing in daring maneuvers, gathering at different locations, using the cover they gained from unpopulated planets and moons. They were trying to gain time, but all it did was delay their unavoidable end.

The ship's Positronic told her that Rhodan and his companions had re-entered the *Good Hope* through its ports. Excellent. Thora changed course, taking them to a less dangerous position farther away from the current hotspots in this battle of annihilation.

Perry Rhodan

It felt like an eternity until they were finally out of their

Arkonide spacesuits. Rhodan left his lying on the floor and ran straight to the control center of the *Good Hope*. The shipwrecked stranger who had been rescued by Tschubai was waiting there. Finally he was able to set eyes on an inhabitant of the Vega system.

When he reached the control room, Alexander Baturin was the first to greet him.

"The stranger is alive and recovering," the Russian cosmonaut informed him, keeping it brief and to the point in his typically professional but somewhat distanced manner. "We are not yet able to communicate with him."

"I'm working on it," Thora said, walking towards Rhodan. "The translators are showing their first signs of progress." She had still not left the space between the illuminated control switches. She had to remain on standby in case she had to maneuver the ship out of a dangerous situation. The *Good Hope* could get drawn into a battle at any time.

Two steps away from her, the blue-skinned being had leaned against the wall. Tschubai and Kakuta, the two teleporters, were kneeling down beside him. Rhodan took in the scene with a sense of relief. Symbolically, by kneeling down in this way, the two rescuers were demonstrating to the person they had rescued that they considered themselves to be on the same level as him. Even if the stranger did not understand a word they were saying, this gesture made it clear that they wanted to help him and that he was among friends.

If the stranger turned out to be a friend himself. Rhodan was pleased for this reason too that the teleporters were at the blue man's side. If he unexpectedly reacted aggressively, then without hesitation, they could literally *take him out* by teleporting him out of the central control unit to somewhere he could do no great damage.

Nevertheless, Rhodan hoped that would not be necessary. As a matter of fact, he was convinced of it. He walked over to the stranger, sat down next to him, and laid a hand on his own chest.

"Perry Rhodan," he said.

The blue man looked at him out of his dark eyes, which resembled pieces of coal in the blue skin of his face. It was confusing for the senses to take in at first. He said something that sounded like *Chratticht*. Was that his name? Had he understood what Rhodan was trying to say with his gesture of introduction?

"Don't waste your energy," Thora suggested, amused by what

she saw. “I know what you’re trying to do, but his gestures and body language are completely different from yours.”

“Are you sure?” he asked her. “Perhaps that word really is his name.”

“He was emphasizing that he doesn’t know what you are saying,” Thora contradicted him.

“Where…”

“The translator is beginning to pick up individual words and is interpreting them into my language. Whenever it understands a word, I can see it on my screen.” She seemed satisfied. “As soon as it is ready to translate everything properly, I’ll set the program to English. Until then, I’ll act as an interpreter. It won’t be long now until we can communicate correctly.”

Anne Sloane also kneeled down beside the stranger. She held a small bottle of water from the supplies they had brought with them from Terrania. It was a dented plastic container with a Chinese label on it.

The extraterrestrial took the bottle from her, looked at it for a second, and put it to his mouth. He drank a little, looked at Rhodan and the telekinetic, and drank some more. He said something again, which Thora simply translated as *Thank you!*

It seemed that none of them before Anne had had the idea to offer him some water. After he had almost suffocated in the rescue capsule and had been gasping in panic for air, his mouth and throat must have been parched.

At least, Rhodan thought, *it seems like his body functions in a similar way to ours.*

The translator was making fast progress analyzing the strange language. Thora was soon able to encourage the Vegan to keep talking and name a number of things. After that, she asked him a number of questions about general everyday matters before happily informing the others that a mostly correct understanding of one another should now be possible.

The blue-skinned man introduced himself as Chaktor and said that he was from the Ferron people.

Rhodan also said his name. “I come from the world of Terra, only a few light years from here.” *Only,* he thought. A few weeks ago he would have considered it impossible that such words would ever cross his lips. “We responded to a call for help.”

“We Ferrons cannot leave this solar system with our

technology," Chaktor explained. "We inhabit the worlds around the sun that can sustain life."

"Who are your attackers?" Rhodan asked.

"They call themselves Topsidians. They are...dreadful. They don't look like we do. They..."

"Lizard beings," Thora said. "That's what the emergency call said."

The man from Vega used his left hand to fumble with the chain that hung from his uniform, its end disappearing into his pocket. "I've never seen one of them. Only pictures. They appeared out of nowhere and demanded the Ferron surrender to them. We refused." His right hand gripped the plastic bottle even tighter. Water splashed out of it into the air, but he obviously didn't notice. "Now we're paying the price."

The space battle, Rhodan thought. *These lizards called Topsidians are slaughtering the Ferrons because they do not want to surrender to them voluntarily. The massacre of a clearly weaker enemy.* If what Chaktor was saying was true, there was no doubt about what side Rhodan would take in this skirmish...if he had ever had any doubt.

But how was he going to help the Ferrons? Everything told him he must, but he didn't see how it was possible. He would have to return to Earth. The deadline he set them as a return date had already passed. There were people waiting for them on Terrania.

"Chaktor," he said, "we have to leave this solar system, but only for a short time so that we can return briefly to our home planet. We cannot let you go—for several reasons. It would be too dangerous to head towards any of the planets here. For us and for you."

"You want to...leave? And abandon us to our fate?"

"We have no choice. We will take you with us, Chaktor, but I promise you that we will be back in your home system as soon as possible..."

"You can't do that! You just *can't*!"

His next words hit Rhodan like a punch, "You...you are the ones who are bringing back the light!"

11.

The landing
John Marshall

The staccato noises of the Eurocopter X5 engine in conjunction with the calming vibration of the rotor drive banished the stress and overload that had been robbing John Marshall of a good night's sleep for days now.

The supercopter used hybrid technology, which combined two counter-rotating rotors with short airplane wings. Two additional rotors on the bent and stunted wings allowed for additional propulsion, making it possible for the Eurocopter to reach acceleration rates of almost six hundred kilometers per hour. It was currently racing towards India.

The inside of the copter was filled with the din of the rotors. Marshall felt his body relax. He breathed in, and as he breathed out, he let himself sink deeper into the passenger seat. The back of the smart seat reacted immediately, and the cocoon structure changed to fit the way he was sitting. The belts tightened automatically, and massage balls started rolling gently against his lower back.

The telepath thought of the *Good Hope*. He asked himself what Rhodan and the others were doing at exactly this moment. About five weeks had passed since Rhodan had met the Arkonides on the Moon and in doing so shaken the world to its core. A mere five weeks.

At the time, John Marshall had still been working at the Pain Shelter, the orphanage he had set up and managed, worrying about how to cope with its terrible money problems. He'd had to cope with the growing violence coming from the twins Damon and Tyler and with the childish enthusiasm of an overweight sixteen-year-old boy named Sid González, who had followed the flight of the *Stardust* with feverish fascination.

The world had seemed just as threatening and disillusioning to Marshall then as it did today. But the dimensions, perspectives, and

sheer magnitude of it all had grown exponentially! He had been catapulted out of the small bubble of the Pain Shelter by a fantastical series of events into the world's new power center. Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, and other *VIPs* had gone from being more or less famous faces on screens to complex and tangible characters.

If the highlight of Marshall's days back then had been acting as a guide to rich and hopefully generous tourists, his main concern now was nothing less than the well-being of all of humankind. Along with Allan D. Mercant, he was flying in the sleek hybrid—half helicopter and half plane—to the superpowers of the Asian continent. It was a gift from the new German government, which had friendly relations with Terrania.

Their goal was to move the leaders to initially adopt a friendly attitude towards the still unknown intentions of the mysterious Fantan. If one of the atomic powers decided to launch an attack against the aliens, it would probably mean the end of humanity. Their knowledge about the backgrounds and possibilities of the Fantan—to put it mildly—was very thin. Nobody knew whether, according to human moral criteria, they were *good* or *evil*, or whether the fact that they were so different made it impossible from the very beginning to judge them using Earthly standards.

John Marshall did not doubt that an intelligent species that had managed to cross the huge divides between the stellar systems also knew how to overcome obstacles and resistance. You did not travel to alien suns without being equipped to face all eventualities. Protecting the ship, their own life, and the mission must be central factors for an undertaking of that kind. Therefore, a nuclear attack on the Fantan would certainly provoke a reaction that humanity, despite having the miraculous Arkonide technology, would not be able to fend off—at least not before they had access to a lot more of said technology.

If Marshall and Mercant—and the other diplomatic teams—did not succeed in stabilizing the political situation worldwide, Perry Rhodan's vision of a unified human race would have been shattered before the *Good Hope* even returned from its mission to Vega.

He felt his heart rate increase. So much for relaxation. How was he supposed to sleep when his thoughts were racing?

"Like birds of prey!" he heard Mercant's voice say.

Marshall opened his eyes. Allan Mercant had activated an ion screen on the arm of his seat, directly opposite him. The pictures

shown on the flow of ionized air flickered slightly from the vibrations of the supercopter. In the mirror-image display, Marshall recognized the small auxiliary craft of the Fantan as they hovered above humanity's famous monuments. These included the Space Needle in Seattle, the Colosseum in Rome, Berlin's Television Tower, and the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, which had once been the world's highest building.

It was true, the auxiliary craft did look like birds of prey, able to hover in one place in the sky for hours before their incredibly strong vision spotted a mouse or other prey, and then speeding downwards at lightning speed to attack.

"Do you think the Fantan have come to Earth to loot?"

The old secret service agent with the youthful features gave a gesture of his hand suggesting he hadn't yet decided on that one. "What could humans have of value to them?"

Marshall shrugged. "I don't know. Raw materials? Water? Food?"

"Seems unrealistic to me," Mercant answered. "Sounds like something out of a childish science-fiction novel. The auxiliary craft and the actual spindle ship that landed outside Terrania didn't look to me like large goods transporters. Why should the Fantan come here with relatively small ships like that? In interstellar transport, the size of the spaceships should play a subordinate role. If *I* were flying about the universe intending to loot, I would bring as much storage space as possible."

"Maybe their gigantic ships are hanging around somewhere outside of our solar system just waiting to be deployed."

Mercant carefully scratched his shaved chin where the helmet strap was tight against his skin. "I think that's also out of the question, John. Their conduct so far has been absolutely straightforward and consistent. No, if the Fantan had brought freight ships with them, they would be standing on the ready inside Earth's atmosphere."

"Perhaps they're looking for smaller, more valuable booty. Maybe minerals or precious metals...rare earth elements like scandium, yttrium and neodymium."

The other man laughed grimly. "And what would they do with those? Copy our pod technology? John, I know you used to work as an investment banker and made some amazing deals with neodymium. But let's not deceive ourselves. Up there..." Mercant

said, pointing his left thumb up towards the top of the copter, “abandoned lumps of rock are floating around space that are far greater sources of *rare Earth* materials than all of China’s damned mines put together could dig up in ten years. Everything that’s rare on Earth might be the main element of an asteroid the Fantan could easily find out there in space. Just imagine a kilometers-wide lump of promethium or smarium. I bet your investment spirit is buzzing at the thought of it.”

John realized that Mercant’s words were not meant in a nasty way. And yet he said, “Allan, why are you always referring to my past life in investment banking? Is my work at the Pain Shelter not important enough for you to poke fun at? You know I don’t have a very high opinion of Homeland Security. Should I start getting into your career?”

Mercant laughed. “I’m sorry, if I overstepped the mark, John.” He pointed at Marshall’s head. “You must have noticed already that I think a great deal of you—regardless of the fact that it’s difficult to keep something secret from you, of all people.”

“We have reached New Delhi, and they have given us permission to land,” the pilot, who had introduced herself as “Karin, just Karin,” interrupted them. “They are even allowing us to land on the lawn in front of the Presidential Palace.”

Marshall automatically sat up straight, and the backrest of his seat moved accordingly. “Now we’ll find out whether we make a good diplomatic duo.” He used his hands to rub the residual sleep from his eyes. “I still can’t believe we’ll be in India in a few minutes. I’ve wanted to visit the country ever since I was a child, but the threat of nuclear war with Pakistan always stopped me from going. When the two countries unexpectedly made peace with each other, I was already living at the Pain Shelter.”

He grabbed the armrests as the supercopter tilted forward and descended fast towards its destination. “What do you think,” Marshall asked, trying to divert his attention away from his churning belly, “the real reason was for Pakistan and India to end their ancient and bitter hostilities?”

Mercant furrowed his brow. “Believe me, many secret services and top diplomats around the globe have been trying to figure that one out for a long time. In vain. Chitra Singh and her Pakistani counterpart, Minister Asif Akram, only met for peace talks a total of three times after fighting against one another in the Kashmir War.

Three meetings that culminated in a peace summit. Highly unusual. But can't there be pleasant surprises in politics sometimes?"

They remained steeped in thought for the next few minutes, until Marshall asked, "How... How should I conduct myself?"

"Let me begin, John." Mercant smiled. "After that, we'll have to improvise. As soon as you snap up anything valuable with your para powers, which might be useful to us in this situation, you can take over."

"I've got zero diplomatic training."

"But you have your powers." Mercant laughed. "That's much better. We're not here to take part in a political game of chess; it's all about bringing the minister president around to our point of view. And I'm absolutely certain that your empathy, or whatever you want to call it, will be of far more use to us than any polished diplomatic experience."

Marshall nodded. The pink governmental palace of India, the Rashtrapati Bhavan, came into view. A splendorous complex, it covered a surface area of more than 19,000 square meters. It got its color from the red sandstone that the walls and the giant dome were made of.

The Eurocopter X5 landed. While the rotors were slowing down, Karin stepped down from the cockpit, opened the door, and helped them release their safety belts. She pulled her helmet off her head, shook her mid-length blonde hair with its copper highlights in the breeze, and called out over the noise, "What an amazing bird! I hope you enjoyed the flight as much as I did!"

Mercant nodded, folded his jacket, and walked past the steely pilot. Marshall gave her a wink and hurried to catch up with his companion. He would never have suspected something like that of the small, ex-secret service man, but he seemed to be quite enamored with the attractive pilot. However, out of politeness, Marshall did not pry any further into the feelings of his partner on this mission.

He focused his attention on their surroundings. Fifty meters before them, a black limousine was waiting. The two men walked towards it in silence. Marshall looked up at the cloudless sky and blinked, blinded by the brightness. The 145-foot-high Jaipur Column rose towards the heavens like a huge spear. The sunlight was refracted by the glass star that balanced on the tip of the column on a bronze lotus flower. Above it was a blurred speck on

the endless azure.

The entire Rashtrapati Bhavan looked very Indian in its construction with its many decorative elements—like the stone elephants guarding the outer walls, for example—but it also could not hide the British influence. The impressive dome of the main building could just as easily have been on top of St. John's Cathedral in London. Then there were the carefully tended gardens which, with their luscious greenery, presented a stark contrast to the pink sandstone of the walls.

Marshall sniffed the air. A dry, spicy aroma was everywhere, coming either from a flower garden or a kitchen—it was hard to tell.

The minister president was waiting in front of the limousine, two sturdily built men in suits and light-blue turbans beside her. Chitra Singh, the great niece of the earlier minister president, Manmohan Singh, was wearing a traditional white saree with elaborately embroidered blue edging. She was standing perfectly erect, her almost black eyes taking in their arrival with a strong aura of inner calm. She radiated authority and dignity. Marshall knew from pod transmissions that the mother of two was just as confident and competent on the diplomatic stage as in her semi-official circle of friends and family.

The two envoys from Terrania remained standing. The former secret service man gave a slight bow.

"Thank you for receiving us at such short notice. My name is Allan Mercant, and this is Mister John Marshall."

"Welcome to India," the Minister President said in a cool tone of voice without changing her demeanor one bit. "I have informed myself about you. You were wanted by your government for high treason, Mister Mercant. Now you have joined Rhodan, and he seems to place a great deal of trust in you. Just like you, Mister Marshall. However, my sources know very little about you. Astonishing, and at the same time alarming when one considers you are already part of official diplomatic missions of your...*state*."

Marshall smiled. Singh's English sounded better live than it did in the pod transmissions. Her words merely reflected what was on the surface, however, and beneath that he sensed her uncertainty and also her annoyance.

"You are no doubt asking yourself why, of all people, Mister Mercant and I have been assigned to make contact with you."

“It is your first official state visit,” she responded. “Please forgive my impoliteness, but why am I not receiving Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, or the Arkonide Crest? Asia is large, and yet we are still neighbors, your Terrania and India. It is a matter of respect.”

Marshall looked at his companion. This was something they had not spoken about. Should they reveal that they did not know where Rhodan and Bull were at the moment and that Crest was not only far too weak but also too valuable to be presented at official occasions, which would expose him to unnecessary dangers?

“Crest, Perry Rhodan, and Reginald Bull are currently engaged in negotiations with the Fantan, making it impossible for them to come in person,” Mercant said. His voice seemed to express genuine regret, which Marshall would certainly have faked if he had not known the truth.

“What do the Fantan want from us humans?” Singh asked.

Mercant reached for his handkerchief and wiped it across his bald head, where beads of sweat had gathered. “We don’t know yet, which is the reason for our somewhat hasty visit. It is vitally important that the states of Earth act intelligently.”

The minister president looked at her visitors, thinking about what they had said. “How much time do you have before you have to continue your tour?”

Mercant looked at his watch. “Twenty minutes.”

“Then we should use that time to speak about the matters that are causing us a great deal of concern.” She looked up briefly at the blurred speck in the blueness of the sky. “My generals already wanted to take me to my bunker and bring that thing down with our ground-to-satellite missiles. Before that happens, we should speak with one another.”

Skelir

Skelir steered the one-person craft with such expertise as he raced at high speed towards his destination that he could easily have managed the maneuvers in his sleep. His decision to head for the country the humans called *India* had been a spontaneous one. It was true that fourteen of the smaller Fantan craft were already there hunting for Besun, but things didn’t look much better on the other side of the planet either.

As usual, when he went on the hunt for Besun, he strove to fight against his rising sense of fear. No matter how hard he tried, he simply could not banish the images from his head:

The mouth of the beast was gaping open. The light of the blue sun was reflected in its four dark eyes. The teeth wanted to dig into Skelir's flesh. And then he saw the blade that he presumed *the animal had drawn.*

The Fantan sped through a thick bank of clouds. Shreds of white whipped against the viewing panel, soon to be replaced by the dreary gray of a storm. It would do no damage to his craft, and Skelir continued flying onwards, even accelerating. He was looking forward to ...

The flashing sword cut off Skelir's third arm. He screamed.

He screamed.

Until he noticed that the images from the past had once again managed to overcome him, as if he were possessed by them. Why could he not simply banish them from his mind forever?

An acoustic signal drew his attention towards the small transmission device, the counterpart to which Jenves was supposed to hand over to the prisoners on the *Sregar-Nakut*. They had made up a story for the prisoners, telling them the device was there to allow them to follow what Skelir was planning to do out there in the world—what all the Fantan were doing out there in their auxiliary craft. In reality, the device was so he could stay in contact with the girl Sue Mirafiore. And the one the prisoners had was for transmitting video images and sound to his own device.

The signal showed that it was on standby and that the connection was working. Satisfied with this state of affairs, Skelir forwarded the images from the exterior monitors into the stream of data that provided the prisoners at that moment with nothing more than a view of the cloud bank and a few flashes of lightning.

On his device, he was able to observe the four humans in the spindle ship. He was not fooled by the belief that they were unaware that this was what he was doing. They would almost certainly refrain from discussing anything secret. But that wasn't what was most important to Skelir. All he wanted was to see Sue Mirafiore, to hear her, and perhaps to *understand* her.

This was a welcome diversion for him, and it made everything so much easier. The girl was walking, always very close to the young human Sid González, between the countless display cabinets in the exhibition room where the two Fantan had most recently brought the Earth inhabitants. At the same time, Jenves was showing the human called Bull how to operate the observation and

contact device.

Skelir focused the screen on Sue.

"You could say they're like hunters and gatherers," he heard Sid González tell her. "The display cabinets hold everything you could ever imagine!"

"And a lot more besides," Sue added. "Look at that!"

"What... What is it?"

"Haven't got a clue. Looks a bit like a toothbrush but bigger."

"Toothbrush?" Sid repeated, skeptical. "I certainly wouldn't stick that thing in my mouth! It's moving! And there's something...growing...on it, whatever it is."

Skelir did not know what a *toothbrush* was, but he wasn't surprised that the two had never set eyes on an enozypalic Lamoster before. All of the Fantan on board had been expending a lot of energy trying to think of what it might be good for—in vain. They knew what it was called, but that was it. And the world it came from was not going to be on their planned flight route any time soon.

Skelir started descending in the one-person craft so that he could land. As he emerged from the cloud cover, he could see an expansive, almost uninhabited stretch of land before him. He could almost certainly hunt for Besun there—easily and without danger. The thought was enticing, but at the same time it disgusted him as well. A real Fantan did not take the first best option! A real Fantan applied his honor and his ability!

The blade flashed again, and the first pain was still burning as it struck once more, impaling Skelir's leg on the ground.

Skelir rebelled against the memories, against the shame, against the feeling of self-disgust. He flew at high speed towards a giant city whose buildings he could make out on the horizon. A short query to the Positronic told him it was New Delhi. He would certainly find something there worthy of a Fantan! He did not want to and could not return to the spindle ship before he succeeded.

Could not return home.

To Sue.

12.

Rico:

The nature of the humans

We trudged through the darkness, and at some point the initially relentless, somewhat mindless flood of words from the driver ended. I knew this type of human; they had been around forever. Full of themselves, convinced they were the center of the universe, while the reality was very different.

I closed my eyes. The silence after all the mostly meaningless babble felt good, but it didn't last long.

"Where exactly are you headed?" he asked me.

I considered what to tell him, but decided that an honest answer could do no harm. "To the sea."

"What sea? Whereabouts, exactly?"

"I... I'm not sure."

"Oh!" he said, suddenly changing the subject. "How long were you in Terrania?"

"Only briefly," I replied, avoiding a specific answer. I asked myself, *How would Takezo react if he knew what state I was in while I was there*? "As you know, I was very disappointed by the entire thing."

"Did you see Perry Rhodan?"

Even better than that. I had met Thora. On Venus. But that was none of his business, so I gave him the answer he probably wanted to hear. "Do you seriously believe the mighty Rhodan would take the time to speak personally to a humble man like me? His fame has gone to his head, I can tell you."

"Gone to his head? Where did you dig up that old saying? My grandfather was always saying that, and my mother laughed at him because of it."

I was saved from having to think up a plausible answer as he had to brake suddenly to avoid hitting an animal that flashed across the road in front of the truck. He cursed to himself but was obviously no longer waiting for an answer.

Instead he asked me, “Did you see that damned beast?”

I had seen it, long before he had. “No.”

“I’ve already noticed anyway that you’re always peering emptily into the distance. You could do with getting glasses, or even better, surgery. It’s cheaper if you go to a proper clinic. I can give you an address.”

He was obviously a lot more observant than I’d thought. Perhaps I had assessed him incorrectly. It had been a long time since I’d been around the inhabitants of this planet, and I was out of practice. My habit of “peering” had always been a weakness in my otherwise perfect disguise, whether as a human or as an Arkonide. However, two good excuses immediately came to mind.

“I’m tired, and the heat of the desert exhausts me as well.”

“Then take a rest. We’ll reach the next town in less than an hour. More of a shanty town, actually; there’s nothing there but a few houses. Pretty much a dump. It’s only got one store that only gets a delivery once a month. No wonder this crappy Gobi run is so unpopular.” He grinned and his face took on an expression showing an emotion that was very widespread among his people—greed. He was obviously well paid for taking on this job. “I can’t take you any farther than that. You won’t be bathing in the sea today, my friend. And you’ll have to look around and find someone else who can give you a ride.”

“No problem. Thanks. A little sleep would do me a world of good.” I closed my eyes again. I wasn’t actually going to sleep, but at least I could concentrate fully on the question that really interested me.

“Just one more thing,” he said. “You told me you wanted to go to the coast. Which one? And where, exactly?”

I didn’t know. “Just the seaside. It doesn’t matter where. I have a real longing for the ocean.”

“Were you a sailor?”

I thought about it, but I couldn’t remember. “No,” I said.

“Did you live at the seaside before? Or did you go there on holiday a lot?”

Asking too many questions could be a very annoying character trait. Didn’t he realize that? “Holidays, yes,” I lied, hoping that Takezo would be satisfied and leave me in peace. “Please allow me to sleep a little.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll chat to other truckers on the CB radio

while you snooze. Don't worry, I have headphones and I'll communicate using text messages. All without saying a word."

"You don't have to be so mindful of me."

"Of course I do! You're my guest. That's sacred to us truck drivers, you know? We're a kind of...global community."

I was already deep in thought. The Venus station, Thora, my destruction, my reactivation and regeneration, this vague longing for the sea—it all had to be connected in some way.

There was suddenly a slight squeaking noise followed by a pneumatic whistling sound as the truck came to a halt.

"Get out!" Takezo said, no longer sounding quite so friendly. Until now he had been annoying but at least polite.

"Thank you..."

"Out!"

I didn't like his tone. But I also didn't care. If he decided to get physical, I could easily overcome him. With my strength, even a well-trained person was no match for me, never mind an old trucker with a habit of talking too much.

Nevertheless, I wanted to avoid a confrontation, so I opened the passenger door and acted as if I knew where we were. It was pitch black outside, and all I could see was the outline of a wall.

"What did I do to make you angry?"

"You've got a lot to learn, you idiot! You obviously fit in better with the other dreamers in Terrania. You haven't got a clue about what goes on in the real world, do you?" He had a pistol in his hand, and he was aiming at my chest. "Now get out!"

I went over my options. He felt safe with the gun in his hand, although it could not harm or kill me as fast as he thought. Apart from that, he wanted to let me get out first—a foolish mistake. Before he had a chance to leave the truck, I would already have reacted.

At that very moment, a bright light flared up outside. There was actually a wall there. We were standing in the backyard of a dilapidated building complex, a kind of factory with several individual structures. A large crowd of men was pouring out from one of the buildings like ants from an anthill. They were carrying crowbars and clubs.

I obviously had a good deal to learn about human nature. Takezo was, first of all, anything but friendly, and secondly, he was not as stupid as he looked and acted. He had organized

reinforcements. Even a biomechanical hybrid like me made mistakes every now and then. It wouldn't be easy to get out of this situation.

I stepped out of the truck. "What do you want from me?"

He merely laughed. "Put your hands up and keep them there!"

I did him the favor of complying but inconspicuously checked out our surroundings. The others gathered around me in a semi-circle, and the truck was at my back. The building rose up behind the men, and there was an entranceway next to it that was connected to a wall that went all the way around. I had only one option.

I turned around, bent my knees, pushed myself up, and jumped up high enough to grab the top edge of the truck. I had pulled myself onto the roof in less than a second.

"How did he..."

"That's impossible!"

"Shit, you've..."

Everyone was talking at the same time. Let them. Their sense of surprise cost them precious time.

On the other side, I jumped down and raced off towards the wall. Freedom was hopefully waiting for me behind it. I would have to improvise.

The wall rose up five meters high, a height I would not be able to overcome with a single jump. I would have to climb it, and that was exactly where the weakness was to be found in the plan I had hatched seconds ago. The wall was too smooth.

I had to find another solution. I threw myself down, and the crowd stormed in my direction. One of them laughed—Takezo.

Maybe the element of surprise would help me. I started a counterattack, rushing towards the first man. He raised his club, and it whistled as it surged through the air. I blocked the attack, grabbed his arm, and turned. I heard the ugly sound of breaking bone, then his fingers loosened and I escaped from the screaming man, taking his primitive weapon with me.

A fist hammered into my belly. At the same time, someone kicked my legs from under me. I might have been a better fighter than they were, and I was also stronger, but they had the numbers, leaving me hardly any chance at all. The fight was over before it had even begun.

They took away the club and started beating me. One of them

kneeled on my legs while others held me by the arms.

"Get away from him," someone roared.

A gap formed between the thugs. A man emerged. His right hand hung down, useless to him, the lower arm bent at a strange angle. His fingers were shaking. His features were distorted in pain; the sinews on his neck were protruding.

"You asshole!" He walked over to my side, and I wanted to curl up, but the others were holding me. He bent over and spat in my face.

"Stop," Takezo said. "We still need him."

"Why?" I yelled. "What do you want from me?"

That's when three shots rang out.

13.

Reason and conscience
Ras Tschubai

"You... You are the ones who come to bring back the light!"

These words uttered by the blue-skinned Ferron left everyone on board as confused as Ras Tschubai. The Sudanese teleporter remembered once again the strange words of the call for help that had brought them to the Vega system in the first place.

Lizards have found us. They will overrun our system! Darkness is driving out the light! You live longer than the sun, it is said. Hurry! Kerlon.

The message also mentioned the light—or to be more precise, the darkness that was driving out the light. And now this Chaktor maintained that the crew of the *Good Hope* had come to bring them back the light. Did he mean the light that had previously been snuffed out by the darkness—by these Topsidian lizards in their warships?

This was a role in which Tschubai did not feel comfortable at all. It sounded too much like the Ferrons saw the humans as their godlike, longed-for saviors. The longer he thought about it, the more he was convinced that he was right.

Perry Rhodan remained silent but exchanged a look with Thora. It wasn't the first time that Tschubai sensed there was a special trust between the pair, so different from each other in every way. Yet, as different as they were, the human and the Arkonide were ultimately very similar in the way they thought and their willingness to take on responsibilities. Both of them were born leaders with strong character. The fact that they often clashed, each of them by doing so making the other better in the process, could surprise nobody who had the slightest understanding of people.

"We can't stay!" Tschubai said into the silence, not caring whether he had the right to express his opinion so openly. Was there even a hierarchy on board the *Good Hope* that said otherwise? They had left Earth in great hurry, a team of companions who

depended on each other in the endless expanse of space. The tone between them had soon become familiar. And if he, Tschubai, was to be the one to issue a warning, then that's just the way it was. "They need us back on Earth!" he added.

Chaktor lifted himself, standing up on his own for the first time since his arrival. "You saved my life when you brought me here." He interlocked his hands and stretched them out towards the teleporter. "Without you, I would already be dead, I would have suffocated horribly. At first, I thought you were a messenger of darkness who had come to ruin my people. But, now I realize you are one of those who has come to bring the light. I can feel it. I *know* it. You can't leave."

Tschubai was touched by the words of the Ferron. There was a sense of respect between them, despite the fact that they came from completely different solar systems. Back on Earth, he had often faced hostility due to the color of his skin. Now, in outer space, communicating with a man with blue skin, he realized how ridiculous such conflicts on Earth were with their often brutal outcomes. Whether your skin was black or white, what was the difference?

He looked around. A few Terrans, dark-skinned and light-skinned. An Arkonide, cool and pale, with red eyes and white hair. A Ferron with blue skin. They were all united, they all understood one another, and they all saw things in a similar way.

Which is why the next words he spoke came very hard to Tschubai. "We must go back," he insisted again before turning to look at Rhodan.

The latter went over to Thora and whispered something to her that the Sudanese man couldn't hear. Then Rhodan pointed his hand towards the schematic holo that was still following the troop movements in the Vega system and on which the symbols representing the Ferron ships were being rubbed out one by one while the ships of the attacking Topsidians hardly disappeared at all.

When Tschubai looked in that direction as well, he discovered a detail that stabbed into his mind with painful intensity. He knew he would not forget it for a long time, despite the fact that—or maybe because—what he was looking at was only a small collection of impersonal symbols that changed their positions in a display made up of projected dots of light.

A Ferron symbol raced towards one of the Topsidian ships. They collided. Totally unspectacularly, the two symbols flickered and then disappeared. Out there in space, the crew—or their commander—of a spaceship full of intelligent individuals had just decided to deliberately collide with one of the enemy ships in order to take it with them into death. Ferrons had died, and Topsidians. And these lizard beings were probably not monsters despite their terrible acts.

Tschubai's fingers were shaking.

"We can't ignore what's going on here," Rhodan said. "My understanding tells me that we need to go, that you're right, Ras. But reason isn't the only thing that matters in this case! My conscience makes very different demands of me. We're staying."

Perry Rhodan

We're staying.

Everyone in the control center fell silent when they heard his words. He knew that it meant they might all die, if Thora was even willing to go along with it. She had the power to steer the *Good Hope* out of this system, to bring it back to Earth with a transition leap. She did not have to follow his decision.

But to his surprise, nobody contradicted him. Thora didn't even turn her head to look at him. Instead, she stared at the virtual screens. In fact, she turned even further from him so that all he could see was her back and long white hair, which flowed down over her shoulders.

"I knew it!" Chaktor cried. "You are the ones we've been waiting for."

We're not the ones, Rhodan thought, but he didn't say it out loud. He would have to talk to the Ferron about it later. If there was a later. If they weren't all killed in the coming battle with nothing left of the *Good Hope* but a short, sharp explosion that destroyed it all; a barely noticeable flicker of light in outer space that left only atoms behind.

It was impossible that the Ferron people could be waiting for a few Terrans. The humans had only overcome the abyss between their two solar systems because they had gotten their hands on a half-destroyed auxiliary craft that had been built by extraterrestrials and because two Arkonides had come to them, one of them being Thora, who was luckily able to steer the craft.

To his relief, Rhodan saw Tschubai nod. Obviously, the teleporter understood why he had made the decision to stay in the Vega system. It was a gut reaction. His mind and his feelings were speaking very different languages in this case. Rhodan had chosen to ultimately follow his conscience rather than logical arguments or survival instincts.

"There's nothing we can do at the moment," he continued. "At least, that's the way it looks. But that doesn't mean we'll just sit here doing nothing. We brought Chaktor on board, and now it's time to take the next logical step."

Thora did look up at him now. She turned around so fast that her hair splayed out. "You want to kidnap a Topsidian?"

Rhodan nodded. "With your help, yes. Do you think it's possible?"

Her red eyes had tears in them, which often happened when she was agitated or excited about something. "If there are shipwrecked Topsidians in rescue capsules like Chaktor was, then it should be possible."

"For as long as I was able to observe what was going on from my ship," Chaktor said, "only one of the lizards' ships was destroyed. There were no survivors."

"You were in charge of your own ship?" Rhodan asked.

"Yes, I was the commander," the Ferron answered grimly. "We were hit and the rotation went off. There was no gravity on board."

"They don't know of the artificial gravity we have," Thora explained, something she obviously knew from the scanner results. "Their ships rotate along their longitudinal axis to generate gravity."

Chaktor folded his arms across his upper body. "There were explosions everywhere. We were floating around the control center. Many of us were thrown against the walls, ceilings, and work stations by the sudden initial thrust and the pressure waves from the detonations, and everyone suffered bone fractures. There was fire everywhere! I... I only survived because one of my officers was thrown on top of me, and he was exposed to a burst of flame that would otherwise have killed me."

"I saw him," Tschubai said. The tone of his voice reflected his horror as he recalled the scene. "He was in the rescue capsule, wasn't he?"

Chaktor's entire body was shaking. "Yes, that was him."

Rhodan was also shaken by the story, but it was important that they didn't lose any time. He had to bring the discussion back to the topic of immediate concern. "Thanks to you, I know the view from one side in this battle."

"I understand," the Ferron answered. "And now you want to hear the other side."

"I *must* hear it. That's one of the reasons we have to get hold of a Topsidian. The other is even more important. If we want to help your people, we have to find out what's behind the lizards' attack."

Thora nodded in agreement as her fingers raced across the buttons on the control unit. It looked like it was child's play to her, as she simultaneously concentrated on what she was doing and on the discussion taking place in the control center. "It is essential to know one's opponent. Only then can one gain the upper hand and achieve victory."

"Can you see a Topsidian rescue capsule out there?"

"Not from here," came her disappointing answer. "If we want to fish for a Topsidian in outer space, we will have to go deeper into the system. Closer to the battlegrounds, to the fighting hotspots."

Into the lion's den, and voluntarily at that, Rhodan thought. "Do it!"

Thora entered a few commands into the control system. "We're already on our way."

Everyone in the control center—the humans, the Arkonide, and the Ferron—followed the *Good Hope's* progress on the holo showing the images from the external monitor. They sped past a group of Topsidian ships, which was busy attacking a large orbital station around the sixth planet.

Beads of sweat formed on Rhodan's forehead. He heard Alexander Baturin groaning, and he got a quick glance at his pale, nervous face.

"I have deliberately chosen this route," Thora said, her voice revealing her deep concentration. Her hands hovered in total calm above the virtual switchboard. "This way, our energy signature is as inconspicuous as possible. The Topsidians are busy. Three Ferron ships are approaching. That will continue to distract them. They have better things to do than look out for unknown types of ships or observe their scanner reflex towards something that is not getting any closer to them."

The enemy ships did not discover them. Thora positioned the

Good Hope behind one of the moons that circled the giant sun, beyond rangefinder scope. On the holo, Rhodan saw a gigantic explosion rip through the orbital station. Burning parts, many of them dozens of meters across, flew in all directions. Some of them were captured in orbit by the gravity of the planet, while others plunged through the atmosphere into the deep. If any of them landed in inhabited areas, they could cause untold damage.

The scanners worked at full capacity, trying to seek out and locate shipwrecked Topsidians. But the search came up with nothing. Thora gave up after several minutes. "The attackers are far too superior! As Chaktor said, there are hardly any destroyed ships of theirs. In the chaos out there, we won't find anything."

"Thora, we—" Rhodan began, but she promptly cut him off.

"There aren't any rescue capsules anywhere out there! Their ships might not even have any, who knows? We won't find out about the Topsidians this way. Don't you understand? There are limits we can't exceed, no matter how much we want to. There *is* no way!"

Rhodan was breathing heavily. Whether he liked it or not, no matter what his conscience told him, he had no choice but to give up.

"All we can do now is withdraw," he decided. Once again, Thora did not object to his order. "This is not a capitulation! We aren't giving up, but at the moment we have no choice but to flee. We need to speak with Crest and find out what's been happening on Earth since we left. But we *will* return to Vega. *This is not over*!"

Just then, Thora groaned, as much from anger as shock. "Another group of Topsidian ships has just appeared! It has sixty ships, ten of which are eight-hundred-meter troop transporters! They're far too close!"

"What does that mean?" Baturin asked.

"We can no longer leave the system unnoticed," the Arkonide woman answered. "We're trapped."

Not only that, but there were sixty new Topsidian ships to destroy the last attempt by the Ferrons to defend themselves...

14.

Family secrets
John Marshall

The Minister President of India, Chitra Singh, nodded to one of her two companions, who turned around and opened the door of the limousine. She stretched her hand out towards Mercant. “Thank you for coming.”

They shook hands before being driven to the main building of the palace. Singh opened up a little during the drive, but Marshall did not feel as if the divide between them was getting any narrower. Her main concern seemed to be to find out more about what sort of threat the Fantan posed so that she could come up with a suitable military strategy.

They reached the palace. Dozens of men and women in uniform, suits, or traditional attire were hurrying through the corridors. Many of them looked over inquisitively at the new arrivals.

Singh led them into a magnificently decorated room. There were numerous bowls filled with fruits and pastries, with precious-looking glass carafes and elaborate silver decorations next to them. A massive desk that stretched from one side of the room to the other dominated the space and was surrounded by several upholstered armchairs. A large bookcase on one wall contained not only many bulky volumes, but also numerous statues of mini elephants, pictures, and other private souvenirs.

Is this Chitra Singh’s personal study? Marshall asked himself.

With a gesture of her hand, she signaled the two dark-suited gentlemen who had accompanied her to leave the room. “We can talk here undisturbed.” She pointed towards the table. “Please, help yourselves!”

She picked up a glass and poured some fruit juice into it. Mercant followed suit, while Marshall simply took a glass of water.

They sat down in the upholstered armchairs. Singh took a sip from her glass and said in a casual tone, “It’s pretty astounding the

chain of events that Rhodan set off on the Moon after he met the destroyers of the Moon base."

Mercant lifted his hand. "The worldwide happenings of the last few weeks are closely connected. That much is clear. However, accusing Crest of being a murderer and treating Rhodan's actions as if they are responsible for the arrival of the Fantan, which is exactly what certain organs of the press are doing at the present time, is—if I may be so bold—rather removed from the truth."

The minister president gave a dismissive hand gesture. "I will be happy if we have the chance, once the Fantan crisis is over, to discuss this *truth* together. But we should concentrate first on the here and now." She placed her glass on a side table. "A total of fourteen ships of these extraterrestrials are currently violating Indian airspace. If it was up to my generals, we would already have reacted accordingly."

"We're glad you haven't," Mercant said. "As we know from recent US history, a preemptive strike generally carries more risk than controlling the status quo does. Mister Marshall and I are here to ask for more time in the negotiations with the Fantan."

Singh bent towards him. "Don't misunderstand, Mister Mercant. I also tend towards eliminating the threat before it has a chance to get out of hand."

"You cannot eliminate a threat if you don't understand it properly."

"Then tell me what the nation of India must reckon with! What do these aliens intend to do?"

While Singh and Mercant became embroiled in a dispute about how reasonable or not it would be to launch an attack against the ships of an extraterrestrial people, John Marshall concentrated on the inner emotional and mental world of the minister president.

Beneath her outer shell of annoyance at the emissaries from Terrania poking their noses into Indian affairs, the telepath could sense that she was very worried about her people—but also about herself and her family. Since the political circumstances had changed and the Fantan had arrived, the military and the highest representatives of the government had been exerting a great deal of pressure on their head of state. They wanted India to put on a show of strength and not just sit around doing nothing until it was too late.

Marshall recognized that Chitra Singh was an upright woman

who was not averse to sound logic. The question that remained was how could they convince her.

The mood between Singh and Mercant was getting darker by the moment. “I must ask you not to interfere in the internal affairs of my country,” she said coolly. “I am aware that you are not a diplomat, Mister Mercant. But it is more than a little impertinent to come to Rashtrapati Bhavan in the belief that you could force the Indian government to act in accordance with your wishes!”

“I could not, nor do I want, to force you...” Mercant began but was immediately interrupted.

“I decided to receive you in the hope that you could give me some additional information. If Crest really is the representative of an entire intergalactic empire, he should be familiar with the Fantan. But you seem to have come here to issue orders to me! Give me one good reason for why I should not shoot down the ships that have penetrated our airspace!”

Singh lifted her right index finger and pointed it at the former special agent. Her jet-black eyes seemed to flash. Marshall was reminded of a scene from a well-known Hollywood movie he had seen about a dramatic winter battle during the Kashmir conflict. A second later he blinked in surprise. The scene he thought he remembered wasn’t from the film! Where...

He looked towards the bookshelves. Most of the photos were of the minister president’s children. They were smiling into the camera, posing with famous personalities from the world of global politics or sitting grinning widely on the back of an Indian working elephant that had its trunk wound around a tree. In between the photos there was an army pistol and nine-millimeter revolver, both on a plain white cloth.

Marshall’s eyes once again moved back to the minister president. What did he know about her past? She’d been the commander of a division during the Kashmir conflict. Rumor had it that while on the move, she’d been shot down at the foot of K2 in the middle of the now famous winter battle. For several days, she was thought to have been missing before she managed, with the help of a Pakistani exoskeleton, to make her way back to her troops.

This story had given the world a great deal to talk about before she was elected Minister President of India, and it was clear to everyone that the rumors were mainly spread as propaganda by the two hostile countries. A short time after that, the serious peace

process between India and Pakistan began. The war of attrition that had pushed both countries ever closer towards an all-out atomic war was prevented, and a moratorium was signed.

John Marshall once again immersed himself in Chitra Singh's thoughts as he tried to get a sense of her. He saw the same scene in the winter battle again. Not a scene from a movie, but a memory. It was not his own memory.

He saw ice and snow, a frozen stream, a storm brewing, and a painful fall. And he could feel the icy chill in the air. He saw soft brown fingers bleeding from several cuts as they grabbed desperately at rocks to somehow get to safety.

All of a sudden—out of the blue—the ice shattered under the footsteps of a walking drone. *No!* It wasn't a robot but a Pakistani soldier in a marching exoskeleton. A machine gun was pointed at her. *Then she saw his eyes.*

"I can give you one reason why you shouldn't attack the Fantan," Marshall said, his voice hoarse. "Because your life too was once spared. By Asif Akram, the man who now rules Pakistan. And since then there has been peace between previously irreconcilable enemies."

He lifted his hand and pointed towards the photos of her children. "And there are more reasons."

Chitra Singh looked at him, flabbergasted. "Where... How do you know that?"

"Why have you never revealed that secret to your two peoples? Would it not have accelerated the peace process?"

The Minister President shook her head, embarrassed. "It would have made us vulnerable. And my husband..." Chitra Singh straightened up. She regained her professional distance. "I don't know where you got that story, Mister Marshall, but you must never tell it to anyone again."

Allan Mercant looked from the Minister President to Marshall and back again, confused at first, but then slowly understanding.

"You have our word," Marshall assured her.

All of a sudden the door was torn open. A man in uniform with a black turban rushed in. "A Fantan is in the process of landing!"

"Where?" the minister president called out.

"In the Red Fort!"

Skelir

Skelir was impressed by what he saw. Not far from a river called the Yamuna, there was a huge, square-shaped fortress complex made out of red sandstone. According to the information provided by the Positronic, the fort was a kilometer long, and half of that wide. The walls reached heights of eighteen to thirty-four meters, and towers protruded at irregular intervals.

It was a good place to collect Besun.

The fort was so big that even the *Sregar-Nakut* could have landed in it. It might have crushed one of the smaller buildings beneath it, but you always have to expect some losses. However, it would have been a shame to cause any damage to the inner area of this white and richly decorated palace.

Large crowds of the planet's inhabitants were walking through the complex and its access paths. Skelir looked for a suitable landing place for his one-person glider, at best somewhere inside the fort. That was no doubt where the most interesting Besun was to be found. Perhaps one of the palace's onion-shaped cupolas?

As he descended towards the ground, the humans ran screaming in the other direction. Many of them had their arms stretched upwards, pointing at the flying device.

Skelir got out. He didn't care about the planet's inhabitants. Let them get on with it; he had better things to take care of. He could feel the excitement rising, one of those rare moments from which he drew strength and power, moments in which he became a normal Fantan. At least in his mind.

At the edge of a green meadow, tiny houses were arranged in very straight rows. Skelir moved towards them but soon realized his mistake. They weren't real buildings but structures made of wood and plastic, some of them with wheels, with a roof made of cheap material. Obviously some kind of contraption to provide shade from the sun.

Interesting.

There were people standing behind each of these structures. Salespeople, Skelir assumed, offering their wares. The visitors to the fortress were strolling in long rows past the structures. At least until they noticed the alien coming towards them. The air smelled of a thousand aromas, even more bewildering than the plant section of the *Sregar-Nakut*.

Screams filled the air, and people were running to get away from him. But not everyone reacted the same way. Many of them

stopped, stared at him, and pulled out small devices, metallic and hardly bigger than their hands.

Skelir hurried towards one of the planet's inhabitants who was holding such a tool or instrument—or whatever it was. She was a woman with long black hair. Skelir wasn't really concentrating on her as he took away her device. It was what they called a "pad," if his memory served him correctly. All the Fantan had received information they had been required to study before landing on the planet. These humans used the devices for all sorts of stuff. The screen showed a photo of him, Skelir, as he was passing the first of the wooden sales stands.

He took the pod with him. The female human was standing there silently, her jaw hanging down. He ignored her, turned away, and went towards the palace with the onion-shaped cupolas. White archways drew his attention.

Before he reached the magnificent building, he discovered something that fascinated him. It was a small house made of the same reddish stone as the mighty walls all around them. Except it was tiny, hardly taller than a human, and it provided at most enough space inside for two, perhaps three of them, if they stood very close together.

Very strange indeed.

He walked towards it. Somebody was just leaving—a man. Drops of water were dripping from his fingers to the ground. The human saw him and took a step backwards, hit the door, which was still slightly ajar, with his back, and then ran away in a panic.

Skelir grabbed the door panel before it could fall and pulled it forward. There was a tiny vestibule inside the little house with two doors leading off it. Before the Fantan had time to examine it more closely, he noticed two humans coming towards him. They had stones in their hands, and they had them held up ready to throw. They actually wanted to attack him!

These fools.

Skelir was carrying a raygun with a stun function on him. He aimed and shot. First the two stones fell to the ground, then the two humans.

He turned once again to explore the small building. There were more important things to do than bother himself with two of the planet's inhabitants who obviously didn't possess much sense.

John Marshall

"What's he doing?" Chitra Singh sounded like she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Her question was almost drowned out by the loudness of the helicopter rotors.

Marshall tried to think of a suitable answer, looking for words to describe the bizarre sight before them, but Mercant was faster, and his description was very matter-of-fact and to the point. "The Fantan is standing in front of a public toilet and seems to be quite enamored with it."

"I can see that!" The minister president placed her forehead against the glass panel next to the passenger seat. "But I... I thought..."

"I know," Marshall said. "There are a great many things one might expect when an extraterrestrial lands in a fort of immense historical and cultural importance, but *that* is not one of them."

Pictures of the Fantan were already being transmitted all over the world since the first photo of an alien had been taken in Africa. And yet Marshall stared at the cylindrical being, unable to tear his eyes away from the strange sight.

The helicopter set down twenty meters from the Fantan at the same time as a second machine, from which a dozen heavily armed soldiers emerged. Marshall had been extremely relieved when Singh had asked Mercant and him to accompany her. He was less enthusiastic about the military presence, especially as he had already seen from the air that a number of tanks were heading for the Red Fort.

"We will try to make contact with the extraterrestrial," he said. "Can I ask you to please keep the soldiers at a distance? The Fantan is not dangerous."

The next seconds proved this assessment to be wrong. Two Indians moved towards the alien with stones in their hands. These self-proclaimed heroes could ruin everything! The Fantan casually knocked them out using some kind of handheld weapon.

"No danger?" the minister president said in response to Marshall's words. "What if he blows up the entire fort?"

"Why should he?" Mercant argued.

"He just shot two people! I can't just stand by and watch!"

The former Homeland Security agent gave a smile that was hard to interpret. "They're not dead. He only stunned them."

"How can you be so sure?"

“The way they fell. The fact that there’s no blood. I’ve already seen a similar weapon that was built by the Arkonides.”

While he was speaking, the three of them walked closer to the alien visitor, the wannabe heroes lying motionless on the ground, and the little cubicle holding the public toilet. A group of people had formed a circle around the Fantan, maintaining a safe distance.

The soldiers made way for Marshall and the two accompanying him. He couldn’t help but think that the sight before his eyes was the strangest thing he had ever seen. “My suggestion would be to have your military forces make sure that Allan and I can talk to the Fantan undisturbed. And please hold back any further attackers from the crowd.”

“Talk?” Chitra Singh pointed towards the bizarre cylindrical being. “In what language? Klingon?”

For a second, Marshall was totally confused until he realized she had tried to ease the tension by making a joke. “You do know what Klingon is, don’t you?”

“Heghlu’meH QaQ jajvam,” she said. “I like old television series. And before you ask, there is a science-fiction revival in India, and it was happening long before Rhodan landed on the Moon.”

“What does that sentence mean?” Mercant asked.

Marshall knew. Sid had quoted the strange-sounding words a few times when they were still living at the Pain Shelter. It was a classic. “Today is a good day to die,” he translated.

“We shouldn’t take that all too literally,” Mercant suggested.

The minister president issued the corresponding orders over a radio that had a direct contact to the soldiers’ commander. The three of them continued walking under the protection of a dozen machine guns of the newest generation. If Marshall’s assumption that the black holes on the upper part of the creature’s body were its sensory organs was correct, then the Fantan was looking at them.

“We want to talk with you,” Mercant called out. “If you want...” He did not finish the sentence.

The strange-looking cylindrical being came on three legs towards them—and, without even turning around, walked right past them.

“Let him pass!” Singh ordered the soldiers over the radio. “We’ll watch what he does and let him do it as long as he does not endanger anyone!”

They watched as the extraterrestrial climbed into his small flying machine and took off. He hovered over the cubicle of the public toilet, and a burning bright ray of energy suddenly shot out of the underside of the auxiliary craft.

A collective scream passed through the crowd. Individual onlookers turned on their heels in an attempt to escape and collided with the people behind them, shoving them to the ground.

There was neither an explosion nor was anyone placed in danger. Instead, the entire toilet cubicle was lifted out of its foundations and hovered in the energy beam until it was just beneath the craft, which climbed into the air, accelerated, and then disappeared.

The minister president summed up everyone's thoughts. "What on earth does that creature want with a toilet cubicle?"

It was a question that neither of them could answer. But one thing was clear—the Fantan could not be judged by their usual standards.

John Marshall felt a headache coming on.

15.

Rico:
Queen

Takezo and his companions froze as the noise caused by the three shots reverberated through the yard. By the sound of it, the weapon was a long-barreled rifle. The reaction of my opponents indicated that they were just as surprised at this turn of events as I was.

This presented new opportunities for me. I waited, ready to use any chance to get away as soon as I could. I wasn't interested in what difficulties Takezo was now facing, who his enemy was, or why he had even lured me into this trap in the first place.

All I wanted was to reach the sea. I wouldn't hang around this pack of truck drivers and hard guys a second longer than I had to. However, there was a risk that I might be jumping from the frying pan into the fire and that my difficulties were about to get even worse.

My opponents were blocking my view. The man with the broken arm turned around slowly, and I saw that his knees were shaking.

"Get away from him!" a shrill voice called out in our direction. It was immediately clear it was a woman, and she sounded as if she was used to issuing orders. "Right now!"

I could see Takezo's hand reaching for the weapon he kept tucked into the waistband of his trousers. "What do you want from us? Why are you interfering? What we're doing here is none of your —" He was quickly silenced by another burst of gunfire.

"Get away from him, okay? That was the last bullet over your heads. The next one will be aiming lower, and I'm an excellent shot! And you, old man, throw your weapon away—and make sure it lands a good distance from where you're standing!"

Takezo obeyed, and his pistol flew in a wide arc through the air, landing close to the truck. Three of the tough guys rushed to

one side, among them the one whose arm I had broken. This triggered a group reaction, a second later my legs were free, and shortly after that, the tight grip on my arms was loosened.

I sat up. My biological parts had sustained some damage, but nothing that couldn't be repaired. Even normal humans were able to heal from such injuries.

"Are the rest of you waiting for an invitation?"

"No," one of the last ones standing next to me called out. Bent forward, his hands held above his head as if to stop a bullet, he stumbled off to the side. I stole a quick glance at his deathly pale face.

A woman was grinning at me. She looked young—astonishingly young for her confident demeanor and ability to use a gun. "Come on, let's go!" She gestured with the barrel of her rifle. "*You* have no reason to be scared of me."

I turned around one last time to look at the old man Takezo, who I had believed to be a harmless, friendly driver. The crotch of his trousers was wet, with drops still dribbling to the ground. Obviously, he was good at threatening others but couldn't take it when the tables were turned and he got a taste of his own medicine.

"Just one more thing," my rescuer said. "In case you're thinking about following us, I won't be shooting you in the head first. I'll be aiming a lot lower, at the spot guys like you use for thinking instead of your brain." She lowered the muzzle of her rifle a little.

I quickly joined her. We left the yard and hurried through the entrance where an SUV with open doors was waiting for us. She handed me the rifle and swung herself into the driver's seat. "Queen," she said with a deep, unnatural sounding voice. "Start!"

The car reacted when it identified her voice and the engine started with a loud roar. I got in as well, closed the door, and we drove off. As we left, I kept my eye on the entryway to the yard that had nearly been my downfall. Neither Takezo nor any of his pals showed themselves.

I chalked it up to experience and swore that I would be more careful in the future. In my second layer of consciousness, I began to analyze my internal recordings of the old man in search of signs of criminal behavior. Should I not have realized he was setting a trap for me? I actually knew the inhabitants of this planet quite well, but he had taken me by surprise. Then again, since Perry Rhodan's trip to the Moon, a new era had begun, and periods of

such transformation always bring forth new modes of behavior among the population. The labor pains heralding this new era forced people to make decisions and join one side or the other.

"Queen?" I asked while the internal analysis was running. *Queen.* "Is that the name you use to identify yourself on your car's computer?"

Her lower jaw was moving. She was chewing gum. "A lot of people use nicknames; it's nothing special."

"What should I call you?"

She thought that one over for a second. "I like Queen just fine."

"You can call me Rico."

She hesitated. "Seriously?"

"Lots of people use nicknames," I said, repeating her words.

That seemed to please her. She laughed out loud while her car rumbled over the terrible roads of this small town on the edges of the Gobi—or through the alleyways of a shithole, as Takezo had called it.

We soon left the houses behind us, and with them the episode that had almost seen me get into serious trouble. The only question was, what direction was my life now heading in with my rescuer, Queen?

A further sparse and rocky plane with stubby bushes stretched out before us. In this terrain, we would soon notice if Takezo and his companions were following us. However, I wasn't expecting that to happen. Queen's appearance had turned them into intimidated cowards who had lost control of their bladders.

As I remembered this, something occurred to me that I hadn't understood. "What did you mean by your last warning?" I asked. "What do those guys think with instead of their brains?"

She turned her head towards me and there was a wide grin on her face. Her teeth flashed white, and she asked me, "You're not serious, are you?"

I shrugged my shoulders in the same way a human would have done in my situation.

She chewed briefly on her lower lip and winked at me. Her eyes were light blue, her brows a thin line. "You're lucky I found you."

"I still haven't thanked you for saving me. Why did you—"

"We'll talk about it later. There are things you can only talk about later. If I hadn't gotten you out of there, those guys would have sold you to the government. Guys like that always need

money, and it would have been a good deal for them financially. It can't be the first time something like that has happened here on the edges of the Gobi."

I didn't understand what she was getting at. Did she somehow know who—*what*—I was? The governments of this world would undoubtedly pay any price for *a thing like me*. I was unique. There was only one Rico. But her suggestion that things like that had happened often did not fit with my assumption that she might know my true identity.

"You really don't understand, do you?" Queen asked.

As it was no longer necessary to hold the rifle in my hands, I placed it in the small space between my seat and the door. "Unfortunately not."

She pushed a button on the dashboard to open her window and spat her chewing gum out with a plopping sound. "You've no idea why they would have sold you?" Her jaw kept moving as if the gum was still in her mouth. At the same time she turned up both corners of her mouth and grinned cheekily. The breeze coming in the open window made her hair fly around. "Just take a look in the mirror, Mr. Rico. You're a good-looking guy."

"But that... What?"

Her comment left me speechless. My bewildering rescuer leaned her seat backwards and steered with her arms stretched out. Laughing, she stretched out her right arm, laid it around my shoulder and squeezed.

"Just a joke, okay?" The car rumbled over a pothole, pulling the vehicle to the side. She quickly grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. "But one look into your dreamy eyes is enough to give you away."

My eyes. *My empty stare*. So she did know?

"You came from Terrania, am I right? From Rhodan? You starry-eyed dreamers are all the same. You stand out a mile away to anyone who knows what to look for."

So that's what she meant. I didn't tell Queen that she wasn't as good an observer as she thought she was. She might just notice her error at some point. "You're right." I wondered whether the lying game that I had most recently played with Takezo was starting up again.

"The government wants people like you, and they're secretly willing to pay pretty good prices, I've heard. You need to have the

right connections, of course, but I'm sure that wasn't a problem for that mob. Once they get their hands on you, the powerful in this country squeeze you dry. Believe me, you would have told them everything you know."

I very much doubted that.

"The government will do anything to find out Rhodan's secret," Queen continued. "I would too, by the way. But I wouldn't let people who turned their back on Terrania be kidnapped for it."

"Instead you rescue them before somebody else can sell them."

She clicked her tongue. "You're my first, but I have to say, I'm very pleased with you so far." She slowed down a little, then turned to me. "As I already said, you're a pretty one."

I was starting to find my rescuer a little spooky. What kind of woman was she? Had she lost her mind? Was she playing with me, or was *this* in fact her way of getting information about Terrania and Perry Rhodan? I owed her one, there was no doubt about it, but I still wasn't sure whether I should bend myself to this human notion of ethics.

I concentrated on just staring ahead—*my empty stare* once again, I thought. She also turned towards the front to concentrate on driving. A minute later, she unexpectedly asked, "Where are you heading, Rico, my friend?"

"I don't know."

"I don't believe you. Everyone's heading somewhere. Close your eyes and listen to your inner voice. What is your heart telling you? What is it you long for? And don't tell me you don't know where you're going. So, Rico—where are you drawn to? Deep inside."

I did as she said and closed my eyes, although that wouldn't have been necessary. In the darkness, I almost believed I could see something moving. It wasn't possible, but when I concentrated on it, I was certain I could hear noises. Sounds that could not come from the SUV rumbling along these dreadful roads. *The roar of waves as they broke against the beach.*

I opened my eyes and saw white sea spray. For a mere second—a second of absolute perfection. "I want to go to the sea," I said.

"Good," Queen responded. She drummed her fingers happily on the steering wheel. "We can make that happen."

The motor revved as she hit the gas.

16.

Revelations
Reginald Bull

"We have to get out of here!" Sid's eyes sparkled, and he looked as if he would like to grab Bull and give him a good shake.

"Stay calm," Bull said. Or ordered him, rather. He pointed inconspicuously at the receiver that connected the small group to Skelir, which at that moment was their only chance to see what was going on outside the strange spindle ship that was standing just beyond Terrania's city limits. Being cut off from the world like this was anything but pleasant for a news junkie like Bull.

The small screen on the Fantan device had been showing him some very strange sights indeed. Skelir had flown to India to steal toilet houses using an anti-grav ray in the middle of a huge historical fort complex.

It was clear to the four humans in the spindle ship that they could not say anything secret as long as the device was anywhere near them. It was probably also recording their movements and everything they said so that the Fantan could keep a close eye on their visitors—or prisoners.

However, the situation was more or less the same all over the ship. And the aliens would hardly have allowed them to wander freely around the vessel without monitoring them all the while. Maybe there were cameras installed everywhere, or tiny flying devices recording their every step. Who knew for sure? Even Earth technology had gotten highly inventive in recent years when it came to spying on people, so who knew what options the Fantan had at their disposal.

"Sue and Eric, you stay here in the room with the glass cabinets!" he called across the room. "Sid and I are going to look around. We'll meet you back here."

The girl and the former *Stardust* doctor nodded. Bull pulled young Sid out of the room with him. There was still a confusing mix of odors in the hallway, coming from the area with all the plants.

Sid started walking in the opposite direction without a word.

Bull followed him. “We have to keep a cool head, Sid!”

“I don’t like being on this ship.”

Bull placed a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “That’s not what counts. We’re not here on a… On a day trip.”

“The Fantan have clearly taken us prisoner! Of course it’s not a day trip. We’re stuck here! Let’s show them what we’re capable of. Let’s get out of here.” He snapped the fingers of both hands, and two sparks flew out of them. That was enough to tell Bull what he had in mind, although it had been just as clear to him before that. “Don’t do it, Sid! Whether we’re locked up in this spaceship or not, we’re not in danger! We don’t want to show our full hand too early in the game. If things start getting too tricky…you know what to do.”

The features of Sid’s emaciated face couldn’t stay still, and a vein was pulsating above his left eyelid. The skin across his cheeks was loose, left that way by the fast weight loss he had experienced in the last weeks. He had been worn down by the numerous teleportations, which was perhaps the reason for his nervousness and lack of calm—typical side effects of losing weight too fast. Of course, in most cases, that was a voluntary—or at least deliberate—process.

“So we’re supposed to just sit here doing nothing? Just wait for something to happen?” the boy asked.

“We’re observing. You have to understand, Sid, that we need to get to know the Fantan. We need to find out what they want from us.”

“You mean, apart from toilet houses?”

“We’ll only be in a position to act once we know and understand their motivation.” He lowered his voice. “Or more than that.”

“And to do that, we have to look at thousands of display cabinets full of all sorts of weird stuff?”

“That’s the way it is. Special situations sometimes demand unusual measures—that’s a piece of common sense advice that my great-grandfather already drilled into my grandmother whenever he started going on about the good old times! So, Sid, let’s keep going. You and I want to explore the ship as thoroughly as we can.”

Sid hesitated for a second. “Sounds like a good idea,” he finally admitted.

Bull was relieved to hear that. Sid would be very valuable to them if things got tough, but it was necessary to keep an eye on him. If he lost his nerve and just teleported away then nobody would benefit, least of all those who were left behind.

But he trusted Sid. The boy was willing to serve their cause and integrate himself into the group. That counted more than anything else, and he would grow with the responsibility placed on him if they just trusted him.

The corridor was extremely plain, and it stretched in front of them for many meters before disappearing into the darkness some distance away. As they continued, however, bright lights came on, and Bull closed his eyes briefly in response.

In the new areas that they could now see, things were suspended from the ceiling using chains and hooks. For a very unpleasant second, Bull was reminded of a slaughterhouse, but he wasn't looking at either animal carcasses or drying hams and sausages.

Sid ran forward a few steps, stretched his arm upwards, and pulled on one of the numerous rods, which came loose. The boy swung his in the air. It looked like a dried tree branch, but the wood—if that's what it was—was a deep blue color, and there were small dots of light moving around on it.

Sid suddenly hurled the rod into the wall and shook his hands. Something that looked like drops of water dripped from his fingertips and splashed to the floor. His expression was disgusted. As the strange branch hit the wall, some of the dots of light came off, hit the surfaces all around, and then made their way back to the branch.

"They're worms," he said. He examined his hand closely, the one that had held the dry-looking branch. He flicked one of the dots of light from his index finger using the other. "Why do the Fantan hang rubbish like that from the ceiling?"

Bull grinned. "Different strokes for different folks. You should have realized by now that the Fantan collect everything that is in any way interesting to them."

"What's so interesting about *that*?"

"Ask Jenves or Skelir when they come back!"

The two of them continued walking. As they walked beneath the rods, Sid lowered his gaze, and lifted his hands above his head to protect himself from falling light worms. Bull was more relaxed.

After everything he had seen in his life, he actually quite liked these animals on their branches. He took it all very casually, saw it as a bizarre triviality, which nevertheless might help them get to know more about the nature of the Fantan.

They reached a crossing. The floor there had a kind of high-pile carpet on it with labyrinthine patterns that bewildered the senses. The longer Bull looked at it, the more he felt as if everything was turning and swaying. He even felt his knees go weak for a second before he was able to tear his eyes away.

"To the left?" Sid asked, on whom the magic seemed to have no effect whatsoever.

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Good answer." He followed the teleporter, wondering what this world of wonders had in store for him next.

Sid suddenly ran off. "Over there!" That was all he said, but Bull soon understood what was attracting the boy.

Part of the wall was see-through, as if they were standing in front of a wide panoramic window. However, the view was not looking outside to the Gobi or towards Terrania, but into a large hangar that was many meters higher than the ceiling of the corridor in which they were standing.

High up in the air, a number of small auxiliary craft like the one Skelir had used were hovering. Two landed and a third took off, flew up to the upper part of the large space, and disappeared through a tingling energy field.

Fantan were getting out of the small ships that had already landed. Some of them carried their new Besun themselves, while others had them transported by robots. Bull was convinced that the mysterious term might mean something like *booty* but that it had a much deeper meaning for the Fantan. Obviously it was also something that gave their existence meaning, and collecting Besun seemed to be one of their main aims in life. The question was whether they saw it as a compulsion or more as a hobby, whether it was a pleasurable activity or a form of work, or something completely different that humans were simply not familiar with.

Bull saw a motionless snake, at least two meters long, in the hands of one Fantan, while a second one held a crusty saucepan. Bull could not believe his eyes when two robots appeared carrying an antique car—a fire-red 1958 Plymouth Fury, if he wasn't

mistaken. One of his colleagues in the Nevada Space Field had had a passion for cars like that and had often raved about them to Bull.

They heard screams.

Bull turned around. “Eric? What are you doing here?”

Before the doctor could answer, Sid shouted, “Where’s Sue?”

That was precisely the question going through Bull’s head, but he said nothing. Manoli looked anything but happy, and it was important not to lose a second.

“Skelir is back.” Manoli’s hands curled up into fists. “He took Sue. There was nothing I could do.”

Skelir

The girl held her only arm close to her upper body, her hand covering her stump. She didn’t say a word, and when Skelir addressed her once again, she grabbed the translation disk demonstratively, tore it from her clothing, and threw it to the floor.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” Skelir assured her. The translation, of course, continued to function perfectly. The devices were so well calibrated to the language of the planet’s inhabitants that direct body contact was no longer necessary. Because of the distance, Sue would hear everything a little quieter, but that shouldn’t represent a problem.

She opened her mouth, took a deep breath, and lowered her head. That was how she had conducted herself ever since Skelir had taken her away from the human named Eric Manoli and brought her to this small room—a transitional space for intelligent alien Besun, which could be flooded with special breathing-gas mixtures. Admittedly, it was an ugly, sparse-looking room, but it fulfilled its purpose.

“I would like to speak with you,” the Fantan tried again.

No reaction. He tried another approach.

“I’m asking you for help.”

Sue lifted her head and looked at him. Her right eye was glistening, and liquid was dripping from it.

“Are you hurt?” he asked her.

“No.” Her voice sounded confused.

“Your eye.”

She shook her head, wiping the liquid away with her remaining hand. “It’s nothing.”

“You’ve already noticed that I am missing something, just like

you," he said. "We are not complete."

She nodded, which among her people was a gesture of confirmation, as he had learned. The translator was working just fine.

"We are deformed and contemptible," he added, paying close attention to her reaction.

Sue's pupils—a strange feature that most humanoids possessed—widened. "I have no contempt for myself," she said. "And no contempt for you either."

Her words shook him. He had never heard anything so insane in his life. She did not feel contempt for herself? With *that* body? Despite her deformity? "Listen to me," he said. "I want to tell you how I lost two of my extremities."

She lowered her arm so that it hung by her side. But she said nothing, and he spoke for the first time about what had happened to him an eternity ago. He had lived through it in his head a thousand times, but he had never had the idea of talking to a Fantan about it. And who else could he talk to? *Besun?* A crazy notion. Crazy...until Sue Mirafiore had turned up.

"During one of my first Besun hunts, I chose an animal as my target. I miscalculated its dangerousness. It bit me and injured me, but I could have overcome it. The critical error lay elsewhere."

Sue's upper lip twitched, but she remained silent.

"I had made a mistake in its classification. What I assumed to be an animal was an intelligent being, and it was carrying a weapon."

The metal flashed in the air before it impaling Skelir's leg on the ground. The Besun drew a second blade, much smaller than the first. It flew through the air in a perfect arc, and it cut again and again.

"It was a kind of sword," he continued. "I was unable to defend myself anymore. The being left me behind and did not kill me, which would have been the right thing to do. Before we left that world, other Fantan found me and brought me to the ship. I didn't wake up again until the wounds had been taken care of. Contemptible."

"Pitiable," Sue contradicted him. Once again, moisture came out of her eyes, this time out of both of them.

"Since then I have been incomplete. Both inside and out. I am afraid of Besun. At the same time, it is what I strive for most, like every Fantan. When I'm on the hunt, it's the only time I don't feel

contempt for myself. But I'm also scared of the hunt. Scared I might make the same mistake again."

"I was born with only one arm," the girl said. "And I've never had the feeling that I was missing something."

"You're lying! You must be lying!"

Sue looked at him. She pressed her lips together as if forcing herself to hold back her confirmation. "I understand you now," she finally said. "Can I go back to the others?"

Skelir granted her wish.

17.

The details of the death
Perry Rhodan

Sixty new Topsidian ships.

Sixty times the death and disaster for the Ferron ships.

Sixty reasons why the *Good Hope* could not leave and was stuck in its hiding place while the crew watched with horror at the dreadful happenings outside in all their gruesome detail.

Perry Rhodan observed the apocalypse on the schematic strategy holo and on the real images shown by the external surveillance system. It had just displayed the burning, wrecked remains of the orbital station, and fragile, helpless ships taking off from the planet. The last contingent.

Chaktor screamed as he watched. He walked towards the holo, unsteady on his feet, and stretched his hand out as if he wanted to pluck the enemy ships out of space and crush them with his hands. His fingers were shaking. He hit his own body with his hands, dug his fingers into his shoulders. Short, painful sounds came out of his mouth, and when the first ship of his people exploded in a ball of flame, he screamed again.

Rhodan felt his pain, but there was nothing he could do to help him. The terrible suffering was unavoidable, and death was gaining the upper hand in the Vega system. Not only death, but also those who brought it with them.

Lizards have found us, the call for help had said. Murderous, dreadful beings. Exactly what so many humans had feared from the Arkonides because they had already seen and read such things in thousands of films and books for centuries: *The invasion from outer space that annihilated all human life.* But might that be a possibility? If the Topsidians really...

Something tore him out of his thoughts. Chaktor had fallen. Rhodan whirled round, and the last thing he saw on the holo was a sea of flame in the planet's atmosphere.

The Ferron was lying on the floor, his hands flat and his head

tucked down towards his neck. Anne Sloane bent down towards him and laid her hand on his shoulder to comfort him. Chaktor moved onto his knees.

"My people are dying." His voice sounded flat, as if he were dying himself. "But you are still here. You are here to bring the light back. *Do something!*"

"We'll try to help you and your people." The unfamiliar body language of the extraterrestrial was confusing to Rhodan. Was that how he expressed horror? Or was he demonstrating his reverence for those he called the bringers of the light? It went against the grain for him to be revered by anyone. Especially as they were just as helpless against the death and suffering being caused by this war as the Ferrons were.

Chaktor fiddled with the chain beneath his shoulder, which Rhodan had noticed before. He pulled a small, shiny silver ball that was on the end of his chain out of the breast pocket of his uniform and held it in front of his face. At first, it looked like he was going to kiss it, but all he did was tap it against his forehead. Then he stroked it with his fingers and squeezed it lightly.

All of a sudden, rainbow-colored streaks appeared on the round surface. These turned into images—pictures of other Ferrons.

Rhodan looked into a female face, the blue skin surrounded by lush, dark green leaves. "Is that your...partner? The woman, you—"

"Yes, she's one of my three wives," Chaktor replied. The picture faded to be replaced by a portrait of another face. "It is comforting to look at them."

The next image showed a bunch of kids. Rhodan estimated them to be at least ten in number. Despite the horrors surrounding them, a smile came to his lips like a spark of hope. *A good baseball team,* he thought. "Are those your children?"

Chaktors stroked the small silver ball with his fingertips as if he wanted to caress his children. "That's almost half of them."

"How many do you have?"

"About two dozen."

He listened as Anne Sloane repeated these words in disbelief, placing special stress on the first word. "*About* two dozen..."

Chaktor dropped the ball back into his pocket, and his face took on an expression of determination. He stood up, and Rhodan stretched out his hand to help him. The Ferron looked at him for a second, a little confused, until he understood the gesture.

"You must meet the Thort," he said abruptly.

"The...Thort?" The question came from Thora. This was the first time she had become involved in the conversation since the new group of Topsidians had arrived. Ever since they'd turned up, she had been working with extreme concentration on the virtual switchboard, her eyes fixed steadfastly on it.

"Our ruler!" Chaktor explained. "You must meet him, all of you! He has unimaginable means and possibilities at his disposal. The Thort and the bringers of the light belong together!"

"Then he is stronger than we are," Rhodan stated. He wasn't very happy about the fact that the Ferron saw them as some kind of mythical or even godlike beings.

Chaktor hesitated. His eyes moved between Thora, the holos, and the humans, his eyes resting on Ras Tschubai longer than on anyone else, as if he expected help from the man who had saved him from dying of suffocation.

"There is no comparison. The Thort is..." The Ferron struggled to find the right words, but he failed and fell silent. "You must help us," he finally said. "All of you!"

"There's nothing I would rather do right now," Rhodan assured him. "But it's impossible. All we can do at the moment is stay hidden here, and hope that we're not discovered. Otherwise we'll all be dead."

Thora's voice suddenly penetrated the space—dominant, gripping, and formidable. "You're wrong about that! There is something we can do."

Thora

Thora spoke, and what she was about to say would have the explosive force of a bomb. "My analyses are completed," she added. "And I am fully confident that my estimation of the situation is correct."

Nobody responded. They were hanging on her every word. The Ferron looked at her briefly and then lowered his eyes.

He is waiting for the words of the bringer of the light who is like a goddess to him, she realized. *He will do whatever I say.*

She looked at all of them, especially Rhodan, interested to see how he would respond to her next words. What would he think of the new information she had? How would he deal with the power that really would turn him into something like a god, at least on

this battlefield?

"We have all seen more than once that the Topsidian ships are far superior to those of the Ferron. But on the other hand, they are as hopelessly inferior to the *Good Hope*. We can gain victory over them and end this battle."

"Haven't you always stressed that the *Good Hope* is not much more than a wreck?" Baturin called out. "It might be that the Arkonides generally have quite astonishing—"

"My analyses are clear!" Thora interrupted him. "And I naturally took into consideration the current state of our ship. We will be able to destroy the Topsidian ships dozens at a time, just like they have been destroying the Ferron vessels. What does it say in your stories I have heard of? *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."*

Thora could sense Rhodan's eyes on her. It was easy to tell what was going through his head. He saw her in a completely new light, and he was asking himself why she was acting in such a selfless manner, free of any traces of cynicism. Why was she wanting to become involved in a conflict from which she could gain no personal advantage.

Rescuing the Ferrons, destroying the over-powerful slaughterers —that really was something Thora would not have seen as her responsibility only a short time ago.

But times had changed, not only for humans or Terrans, but also for her. What was more, she still had her hunch. Could the Vega system be the place she and Crest had been searching for all this time?

"I'm waiting," the Arkonide woman emphasized. "Every unnecessary second we stand around here doing nothing in our hiding place could mean the destruction of a Ferron spaceship."

"Okay, if we *can* do something," Rhodan said, "the question remains whether we are allowed to. We know nothing about the Topsidians."

"You're hesitating and dithering now?" she asked. "Now, of all times?"

He looked at the faces of his companions, one after the other. Ras Tschubai nodded as did Anne Sloane, just as Daria Morozova and Wuriu Sengu did.

"We're attacking," Rhodan announced. "Thora, set the *Good Hope* on course and get the weapons ready."

Thora smiled. She had long since taken care of the necessary preparations. There were no torpedoes she could have filled the shafts with; the *Good Hope* didn't have a single one. The two thermo-guns, one at each of the spherical ship's poles, however, were already on standby. Using them against the enemy ships, the small sixty-meter auxiliary craft would cause a pathway of destruction.

She steered the ship out of its protected position, hiding behind the moon away from enemy scanners. Her first target was one of the lizards' ships that was chasing a Ferron craft. The *Good Hope* raced at full thrust into the row of Topsidians, with both thermo-guns going into action simultaneously. Flaming energy rays shot towards the 250-meter ship. The second attack broke through the protective shield, bursting it open. The Topsidian craft lay before them, naked and without protection for the mere blink of an eye, and then the third volley from the thermo-guns smashed its outer shell.

Metal melted, and the ship's atmosphere dissipated in a fraction of a second. A wall of fire exploded into space in a murderous mushroom cloud of destruction. The enemy spaceship smashed in the middle, one of the broken-off pieces disappearing immediately in a gigantic explosion. Blue flashes of energy twitched, no doubt a propulsion unit detonated by the escaping pressure. Blinding white light arched upwards, and then it was gone.

The remaining half of the ship continued to fall apart. Pieces of the outer shell raced through space like asteroids, one of them burning up in the planet's atmosphere. Tiny dots spread out from it like spores—individual decks, walls, and *members of the crew*.

"Thora!" Rhodan called out. "No complete destruction anymore! Shoot to make the ships unable to maneuver. Hold them up or force them to flee! Shooting down this ship must act as a warning!"

The ship's systems picked up radio contact sent by the Topsidians in the language of the Ferrons. The Positronic translated the message into Arkonide, and Thora stared at it. It wasn't addressed to her, but it was the last message sent from the destroyed ship:

Respect life! Preserve it where you can. Only destroy it where it is unavoidable.

What was that supposed to mean? The words seemed mocking

in view of the merciless slaughter of the Ferrons that had been and was still being carried out by the Topsidians. Because it wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot.

Thora deleted the message, and the *Good Hope* raced towards a group of Topsidian ships, opening fire as it went.

18.

Rico:

Missing the stars

For the first time in eight hours, Queen turned the motor off, pulled the handbrake, and rubbed her neck. “This is an ugly area.”

I opened the window. The evening had come, and it was July 31, 2036 according to the most common dating system used on this planet. The sun was already sinking, but the roar of car engines and the clatter of machines in the factory buildings were obviously a round-the-clock phenomenon in places like this. What was more, the noises of the huge number of people working at the harbor mixed in with the other sounds. But I could hear the splashing of the waves as they came up against the walls of the quay and the sides of the ships.

“It’s a beautiful place,” I said, contradicting the last words of my driving companion.

“You find it *beautiful* here? I’d already noticed that you’re a little strange, but that is complete madness.”

I turned towards her. She was rubbing her eyes. “Why did you drive me more than fifteen hundred kilometers right across the country, Queen?”

She opened the door of the SUV and got out. “You’re only asking me that now? After we’ve spent a full day—”

“I’ve been thinking about it for hours,” I cut in. The long journey had been opportune for me. During the trip, my autorepair system had finished its detailed maintenance and perfected the biotechnical transitions. Finally, both inside and out. I thought back in disbelief to the melted heap I had been—all that was left of me when I’d woke up in my hiding place underneath the stones in the Gobi.

Queen leaned against the car, stretched her back, and tilted her head until it was resting on the roof of the SUV. “I used to be on the road a lot more often and for longer periods, but *this here* really does you in.”

I stepped up next to her. “What do you mean?”

She straightened up and turned towards me. “Forget it. So, Rico, you’re at the seaside. What now?”

I had to contradict her once again. “I’m not at the seaside. I’m in the middle of an overpopulated harbor complex, in which you have managed to find the last available parking space in front of a giant factory building.”

A giga truck thundered past, braked with screeching pneumatics, and almost collided with a bus that was transporting workers between buildings. The bus had stopped in the middle of a crossing because an automatic loading crane was moving a container ten meters in the air, and a large number of squeaking rats were raining out of it. They were tumbling over and over, thrashing about in the headlights with their tiny legs before hitting the ground.

“Let me guess,” Queen said. “You find that beautiful, don’t you?”

“It is at least pleasant to be able to hear the sea.”

“You can really hear it?”

“You’re right,” I said, averting any further discussion in that direction. It was better if she didn’t know how good my hearing really was thanks to my biotechnological hybrid fusion. “Can’t you bring us closer to the sea? To a spot that is not sinking in filth and full of people?”

Queen sighed and got back into the car. She started the engine using just her voice. “It won’t be easy to find a better place close by. The interactive map doesn’t look very promising.”

“Is the Gulf of Bohai this densely populated everywhere along the coastline?”

“This is the nearest sea to the capital city Beijing,” she explained. “So if you’re looking for huge crowds of people, this is the place to come.” She drove off, but we made extremely slow progress. Buses, trains, suspension railways, loading cranes, warehouse vehicles... It was pandemonium. Queen strove to make her way through the crowds with admirable calm.

While she did so, I tried to find out more about the sense of longing I felt. *What* was it that had been pulling me so strongly towards the sea ever since I had woken up? However, despite the fact that we were already quite close to the seawater, I couldn’t find an answer.

“You’re nervous,” Queen commented.

“Where did you get that idea from?”

“We’ve been sitting for half of eternity in the same car together. But this is the first time I’ve seen you intertwine your fingers and play with your nails.”

I looked down. “You’re right.” It just slipped out before I could stop myself, and I even surprised myself.

She tooted the horn as a swarm of people crossed the road right in front of her. “I know that feeling.”

I slowly pulled my hands apart. “You know…what feeling?”

“When you have such a feeling of longing that it drives you crazy. Don’t misunderstand me, I don’t give a damn about the sea. In fact, I don’t like it.”

“But?”

As she couldn’t drive any farther anyway, she bent over towards me until her mouth was very close to my ear. “The stars,” she whispered, and her breath caressed my skin.

The hairs on my neck stood on end. I was happy that the many small, apparently meaningless details of the human body had been reproduced so well. “You of all people long for the stars? I thought you believed everyone in Terrania to be crazy.”

She smiled in a way that was hard to fathom. “I told you from the beginning that I’m trying to collect information about Perry Rhodan. To find out his secrets.”

“There are easier ways to do that than drive me fifteen hundred kilometers to the sea.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Finally, the last worker crossed the road, and Queen was able to move again. We soon reached the end of the factory complex. Beyond the artificial light, the night sky was already very dark. However, the sea was not freely accessible from here. An ugly row of bunker-like buildings belonging to a satellite town around the harbor that provided workers with cheap accommodation was standing between us and the water of the bay.

The road moved even farther from the coastline and then ran roughly parallel to it. I considered getting out and trying my luck on foot, but unlike the trip with Takezo, this time I didn’t feel the slightest inclination to get rid of my companion. Queen was keeping a secret—and I wanted to find out what it was. I found her interesting.

Her next words tore me out of my thoughts. “Look over there. A sign. Another three kilometers to a beach. That’s where you want to be, Rico! I hope you’ll find what you’re looking for.”

“Unlike you,” I responded.

Her hands tightened their grip on the steering wheel. “I’m already on the right track.”

When we got out of the car, everything in me wanted to run, but I suppressed my longing and walked beside Queen at a comfortable pace past the few people who were still lying on the beach despite the darkness. Joyful screams and high-spirited laughter came from the direction of the water.

“Tourists,” my companion remarked. “No doubt many of them come here on their way to Beijing. Those two, for example.” She pointed in the direction of a low bush in the shade of some palm trees, which had almost certainly been artificially cultivated. The leaves were rustling. I followed her gaze and thought I could make out bare legs. Irrelevant. I kept going and didn’t stop until the gentle waves were splashing against my feet.

“I’m sorry, Queen,” I said.

“What for?”

“You brought me to the sea, but I can do nothing to take away your longing for the stars.”

“Do you feel as if you’ve reached your destination?”

I couldn’t answer the question, either for her or for myself. Without thinking, I walked another step forward, the water now up to my knees.

“You’re not being drawn by the sea, but *into* it,” she said.

I nodded, surprised to realize she was right.

“We’re not as different as you think, you and I,” she added.

“I’m not sure whether you—”

She didn’t let me finish. “My name isn’t Queen.”

“Obviously not.”

“And you are not who you say you are!”

I bent down and dipped my hands in the water. “You’re wrong. I’m Rico.”

She also came into the water, stood before me, reached out for my hand, lifted it up, and held on to it. “But you’re not human.”

We remained silent. *Where did you get that idea from? How do you know that? Have you lost your mind?* I didn’t ask any of my questions out loud.

She kept hold of my hand.

"And now?" I asked.

Queen leaned her head to one side, pulled her index finger over her eyes, and closed her eyelids. Then she waited, silent and motionless, while the gentle waves swept pleasantly around us. My desire to dive beneath the surface became even stronger.

Instead, I looked into her face. "Why are you keeping your eyes closed? What are you planning?"

"I'm revealing myself." She opened her lids, and her irises were suddenly red.

"You're not human either," I said.

"But although neither of us is a native of this planet, we are fundamentally different from one another. I am an Arkonide, and you... Whatever you might be, Rico, we are connected in some way." She tapped her fingers against her chest. "Your longing for the sea..." She slowly lifted her eyes. "...my longing for the stars. I can help you fulfill your desires...if you help me too."

19.

Double escape
Sid González

Sue had disappeared, kidnapped by one of these Fantan people!

Sid's emotions were everywhere. He should have seen this coming. There'd been a sense of disaster in the air from the very beginning, no matter how fascinating and, as Reginald Bull was constantly reminding them, unthreatening the spindle ship with all the crazy things on board seemed to be at first glance.

"What should we do?" the young mutant asked. "How can we find Sue?"

"We'll demand to speak to a Fantan," Bull said. "Because this Jenves and his fellow *guards* are responsible for us and are almost certainly observing us."

"And if not?"

Bull suddenly didn't seem to be as calm and collected as he had been since they had entered the Fantan spaceship. His fiery spirit returned, something Sid had painfully missed before.

"If not," Bull declared, "then we will make sure they pay attention to us." He lifted both hands and balled his fists.

Eric Manoli looked totally confused. "Do you intend to seek out a Fantan and attack him?"

Unlike Manoli, Sid knew right away what Bull meant, and he was of the same opinion. After Sue's kidnapping, it was time to send a clear message.

"Of course not! If necessary, we'll return to the exhibition hall or whatever it is and break everything in it to pieces! That'll soon send them running!"

Manoli nodded slowly in the manner Sid had come to know him for. He was calmness personified—unlike Bull.

"Jenves!" Bull called out to nowhere in particular. "Can you hear me?"

No reaction.

Bull started speaking louder. "We need to talk, Jenves! Do you

know what your colleague Skelir has done? We demand that you release Sue Mirafiore immediately and that she is returned completely unharmed."

They were still standing at the large panoramic window, through which they could observe the comings and goings in the hangar where the Fantan ships were arriving and departing. Sid tapped the pane hard.

"By the way, there are enough Fantan in there, if we want to speak to one of them. They seem to be in very good spirits with all their stolen goods. Should we ruin their party?" It would only require a mini teleporter jump, a few meters to the floor of the hangar.

Eric Manoli shook his head. "It would be better to try and reach one of the two Fantans in charge first."

This request was fulfilled faster than Sid would have thought possible. Skelir was the only one of these cylindrical beings he could immediately tell apart from his fellow Fantan, because unlike the rest of them, he only had four tentacles. And he wasn't the only one walking towards them as if nothing had happened. Sue was with him, and she was every bit as calm.

Sid rushed to her side. She appeared to be unharmed. "Why did he kidnap you? What did he do to you?"

"Keep calm, Sid. Don't lose your nerve!" Bull said to him—feeling like it was the thousandth time he had had to do so.

"Not that I have to explain myself to Besun," Skelir said, "but I had to talk to her."

Sid placed himself between Sue and the alien. Perhaps it would be better if they all disappeared from there. A few jumps and the Fantan could look for new Besun. But he held himself back. He was a part of this mission, and he would do what Bull said. He had to fit in and follow orders, even if it was a painful reminder of his time with Clifford Monterny, where he had learned what hierarchy meant.

Sue held her silvery translation disk in her hand, rubbing it casually with her fingers. She looked straight at Sid, and she seemed to be grateful that he had been worried about her. "He did nothing to me." Her voice didn't sound as if Skelir had forced her to say that.

The Fantan turned himself around so that he could look at Sue—stare at her—out of his creepy-looking eyeholes. "Just as I

promised, you are back with your own people."

Was Sid mistaken, or did the fine scales on the upper half of Skelir's cylindrical body move a little as he said these words? The teleporter did not believe that humans would ever be able to understand the gestures of these strangers. If they even had gestures to express their emotions.

The extraterrestrial walked off on three of his extremities.

Sue followed him with her eyes. "I think I understand him better now."

"Explain it to me," Bull requested. That was exactly what he was aiming for the entire time—to understand the unusual ways of these strangers.

Sid thought back to the time he had spent with Sue and the other street kids at John Marshall's Pain Shelter. She had always been something special, always emanating a deep sense of calm. She had never interested Sid, who preferred to withdraw into his own world, into his dreams about the stars and extraterrestrials. Meanwhile, these dreams had come true—in a far more unbelievable way than Sid could ever have imagined.

The dainty girl, who looked even younger than she actually was, turned her gaze towards the hangar. Her eyes widened when she saw the constant comings and goings.

"Besun is everything for Skelir. He strives for it, it helps him, but it also scares him. He is, however, very unlike most of the Fantan in that respect." She tapped the window with her index finger. "Those aliens down there aren't plagued by similar problems. Skelir would like to be like them. His life is one big contradiction. I... I feel sorry for him."

Sid couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Did he brainwash you? You're being manipulated, Sue!"

"You're wrong," she assured him. "Skelir told me the truth about himself and his life, that's all."

Sid didn't like being on this ship, no matter how fascinating it was. He now knew that the Fantan were a lot more cunning than first appearances let on. In his opinion, they were pulling Sue surreptitiously over to their side.

Skelir

It was anything but easy to understand what went on in the heads of this planet's inhabitants. The behavior of the young

human, Sid González, was becoming increasingly strange. But Skelir had never understood humanoids, and he considered the old Fantan saying *ugly on the outside, strange on the inside* to be very fitting. And it showed that the Fantan had already had difficulties understanding peoples like these for generations.

Following his conversation with Sue, he went back to the main hangar to see whether his Besun was still waiting there to be transported away. To guarantee that all processes ran smoothly, pieces of that size were put on a waiting list. The companions of the astounding girl had been standing very close to the hangar entrance, behind the large glass panel, so it didn't take him long to enter the hangar.

There was a great deal of hustle and bustle in the large hall. The Besun hunt had been very effective. Many of the Fantan had been happy to collect small but fascinating pieces.

Muloren walked past him. He was carrying a pile of thin, rectangular disks that were a few millimeters thick and about as long as a human head. When he took a second glance, Skelir noticed that they were made of paper. As the disks were not precisely piled on top of one another, he could see that each of them had a picture on the top with a few letters from one of the strange alphabets the humans used.

His attention was drawn to a four-person craft just landing. An animal with four legs, dark fur and a bushy tail was thrashing about in the anti-grav ray, letting out dull barking noises the entire time.

He couldn't find the small building he had stolen from the fortress complex anywhere. The transport robot had obviously already taken care of it. However, when he thought about it, he realized that he didn't really care.

Instead, in his mind's eye, he saw the girl Sue again and again, heard her words, heard her emphasize that she did not have any feelings of self-contempt. *And no contempt for you either*, she had added. That confused him, and strangely enough, the feeling got stronger as time passed.

The craft with the barking animal landed. Robots came and collected the Besun. The passengers left the craft carrying a type of bush with a number of shiny round red objects hanging from it. One of the Fantan picked some of the berries and ate them.

The atmosphere was relaxed, but Skelir didn't feel like part of the general mood. He had just decided to go to his quarters when a

familiar figure approached him.

"So, can I finally go now?!" Rokarn, who had been forced to stay and do guard duty for Skelir, called out to him. "I've picked out a continent called Australia. It is said there is an indigenous people there who..."

Skelir was hardly listening, and Rokarn's words were fuzzy in his head. He remained standing out of politeness but clearly gestured with a certain movement of his head that there were important things waiting for him to do. Rokarn understood and was just walking away when the alarm rang out. The busy goings-on in the hangar stopped dead. Rokarn crossed his upper arms in horror. The names Reginald Bull and Sid González popped into Skelir's head. They were planning something! They were to blame for whatever was happening! They should have been locked up right away.

An announcement that came through on the ship's communication system a second later to every Fantan on board proved him to be wrong. The humans were not responsible *for that*. He wished they had been, because *this* was much worse.

The auxiliary craft that had been intending to leave the hangar dropped to the ground again and landed. A radio message was sent to all Fantan currently out on the Besun hunt. A countdown was running, and there was not much time to return. If it had been up to Skelir, he would have shortened the time immensely.

He hurried to the emergency warehouse where the Dosti hoverbots were, and making use of his authority as the current guard and Fantan in charge of the planetary-inhabitant Besun, he took one of the devices, jumped on, and raced off.

He wasted no time on the luxury of the cleaning and shaking function. He had to speak to the humans. He didn't care about the others, but Sue should know what was happening and why.

Sid González

The shrill tone had been wailing for seconds now. Sid had no doubt that it was an alarm, because not even the Fantan could find this noise pleasant. Besides, several of the aliens were hurrying through the corridors as if the world were going under. Nobody took any notice of them.

"I ask myself," Eric Manoli said in that annoyingly calm way he had, "what the announcement meant."

“You’re not the only one.” Bull hit the panoramic glass window with his fist. Meanwhile, a large hatch had opened in the hangar, and there were no longer only the small departure and arrival openings protected by a wall of energy. Auxiliary craft were arriving at extremely high speeds, not braking sharply until they were already inside. It was a wonder that there weren’t any accidents—or it was the result of perfect Positronic steering. “We’re given these translation disks, and suddenly they don’t work when things start to get interesting!”

“That was almost certainly no coincidence,” the former *Stardust* doctor said. “The Fantan don’t want us to understand what problems they’re facing.”

“In my opinion,” Sid said, “it’s time to finally get out of here. What’s going to happen? Maybe the entire Indian armed forces are attacking the ship and found a way to bomb it into oblivion! Do we really want to stay here to die with the Fantan?”

Manoli shook his head. “Reg and I were on the *Stardust* when the Chinese fired countless explosive projectiles at us! The protective energy shield easily fended off the attack. This spindle ship certainly has a protective shield that can hold off any human weapons.”

“I still think Sid’s right,” Bull said to the boy’s surprise. “You should prepare to get us all out of here. We’ll wait for the time being. It could turn out to be very important for us to know what’s happening here. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if Skelir didn’t turn up any minute now. He seems to have developed a certain fondness for you, Sue. When he comes, ask him—”

“I understand,” she interrupted him. “And he’s already here.”

At that same moment, the hoverbot—which resembled a flying motorcycle, but without any wheels and with a seat that strangely looked more comfortable than a motorcycle’s—stopped beside them. Skelir was sitting on it.

“What happened?” Sue asked.

Skelir’s eyeholes looked towards her. “A second, much bigger Fantan ship is coming in to land.”

“And why...”

“We have to get away from here as fast as possible,” Skelir explained. “The countdown will end in only a few seconds.”

Sue lifted her hand and pointed at Bull, Manoli and herself, one after the other. “What will happen with us? Can we go?”

The Fantan let out a strange sound before giving the devastating answer that Sid was expecting. “You are Besun.”

“So, we’re prisoners?”

The hoverbot lifted up a few centimeters more. “You have to stay on the ship. I’ll soon return to…take care of all of you.” Skelir then turned around and sped off on his machine.

Bull stretched his arms out. “It’s time! Sid, we’re getting out of here!” Eric grabbed Bull’s right hand, and Sue took his left. Sid concentrated. Sparks began to fly. He took the two hands that were stretched out to him. Anyone he wanted to take with him when he jumped had to be in direct physical contact with him.

“Stop!” Bull called out. “It’s too late!”

Confused, Sid broke off the jump. Just like Bull, he looked into the hangar and noticed the flickering energy shield in front of the closing hatch.

Bull cursed. “Damn it! You can’t jump through the shield.” He let go of Sue and Manoli’s hands, and they let go of his. “It’s too late!”

Sid was alone, no longer touching anyone. Nobody stopped him. He could, and he had to try it. He *wanted* to. “Says who?” he called out—and jumped.

His surroundings disappeared. Sue and the others disappeared. *Terrania,* he thought, *here I come.*

However, the square before Stardust Tower, which was his destination, did not appear. The tower, which stretched up higher than all other buildings in the emerging city, did not manifest before him.

Instead, everything was dark for a second. Sid only had enough time to wonder what was happening, and then the pain started.

Sparks. They were everywhere, even more than usual. He asked himself whether he really was seeing them, and then they were eating their way into him. The darkness ended, and when he suddenly saw the inside of the Fantan ship again, he was standing in front of the large panoramic window, staring through wide eyes at the small slit of the closing hatch. The Earth’s surface was far below him. They were flying, and the spindle ship exited the atmosphere.

He heard Sue screaming, and that was his last clear thought. Everything disappeared, but the flames were bright and *hotter* than any fire.

“He’s burning!” Sue screamed. “Do something!”

“Get back!” It was Manoli.

Sid didn’t see either of them. He would probably never see anything again. Should this fire not have already melted his eyeballs? He felt something like a punch and hit a hard surface. He realized he was lying on the ground.

“It must be excess energy!” Manoli yelled. “I can think of no other explanation. The energy of his jump, the protective shield, it…”

Sid heard no more than that. He screamed out in pain. Surged upwards. Punched the air around him. A miracle happened, and he watched the flames retreat and then go out. And yet, each of his fingers was still like a flare, with sparks flying out of them—a familiar, comforting, painful streak of sparks.

“Sid!” was all he heard. Was it Sue? But then the blackness overcame him, and everything ended in absolute darkness.

20.

Help denied
Perry Rhodan

To Rhodan's great relief, Thora actually did what he asked her to. The volleys from the thermo-weapons located on the poles of the *Good Hope* destroyed the Topsidians' protective shields, but not their ships.

Thora worked precisely, shooting in such a way as to render the spaceships unable to maneuver. Partial sections of the enemy vessels exploded, and there were cracks in the outer shell, but none of the Topsidian ships went up in an explosion that brought complete destruction.

This helped the *Good Hope* to clear a path but avoided unnecessary fatalities. Thora conducted the inferno as excellently and with as much command as she had demonstrated while steering the sixty-meter auxiliary craft from Terra to Vega. With a cool, almost expressionless demeanor, she kept the ship on course, avoided all counterattacks, and steered again and again towards new enemy ships to put them out of action.

With the help of the strategic holo, Rhodan followed the areas she chose each time, and this earned her even more respect from him. She was always ahead of him in detecting the spots, the loss of which caused the most damage to the Topsidians' military capabilities. And she did it despite the fact that, *parallel to that*, she also had to steer the *Good Hope* as its pilot.

"Look at that," he heard Tschubai say. "The Topsidian advance is failing! They have realized that a superior opponent has come on to the scene."

The teleporter was right. The schematic holo showed the Topsidian ships gathering and changing course to get out of the Vega system. They were accelerating, no longer interested in either the Ferrons or their own ships.

"You are the rescuers that are bringing back the light."

Rhodan turned around when he heard Chaktor's words. The

blue-skinned stranger had now stood up. He was smaller than most Terrans, but that didn't mean he was small among his own people. He was a little smaller than Tako Kakuta, who was standing next to him. The blue man was now a stocky and well-built figure who seemed to burst with vitality. There was no similarity to the weak, broken individual that Rhodan had come to know thus far. The unexpected turnaround in the battle had put the wind back in his sails. This was another way in which Ferrons and Terrans were obviously similar—their mental and emotional state influenced their physical state and their entire outward appearance.

Once again, Chaktor took out the little sphere with the photographs of his family, tapped it briefly against his forehead, and activated the images. However, he hardly looked at it, and it seemed to Rhodan that it was more a way for him to feel connected to his family.

The scene touched something in Rhodan—a still, quiet moment before he turned back again. From one second to the next he had been thrown into a war in which the Topsidians had initially taken the lead and the course of which was now being determined by Thora and the *Good Hope*.

As always, she was the very image of extreme concentration, her cool face framed by her white hair, and red eyes that seemed to shine. Her lips were moving, but that was barely noticeable unless you looked very closely. Rhodan couldn't tell whether she was mumbling something to herself or whether the movements merely came from her breathing.

He moved closer and looked at the virtual screen directly in front of her. It showed a real image of the planet they were flying towards. About half of the globe was in view, its curvature arched out to the sides of the image. There were two moons opposite one another, and they overlapped from this perspective. One of them was a dull orange, the other a bright yellow. Two ships flew between the planet and its satellites—an eight-meter Topsidian craft and a comparatively tiny, fragile ship belonging to the Ferrons.

The lizard-like aggressors fired, and the ship of the Vega inhabitants exploded in a huge fireball. Only Rhodan and Thora could see this gruesome, merciless detail of the battle, as the screen was not visible to the others from their positions. The small Ferron ship detonated in the very same second Chaktor let out a cheer, and the others joined him.

Rhodan briefly closed his eyes before turning to the side to look at the entire strategic holo and see what the reason for their cheering was. Everywhere in the Vega system, they could see Topsidians fleeing. Perhaps he and Thora had witnessed the very last destruction of a Ferron ship—a moment that would be etched into his memory forever.

All of a sudden, the *Good Hope* shook heavily. Rhodan was nearly pulled off his feet. Then he heard a scream—Daria Morozova, if he was not mistaken.

The situation seemed fatally familiar to him. There had been a similar quake when the Topsidian fleet of five hundred ships had materialized in the Vega system all at the same time. It had obviously caused something like a spacequake that impacted everything in their surroundings.

A cold shudder ran down his back as he tried to imagine how many more ships of the aggressor were coming into the system as reinforcements, possibly those that were even bigger or better equipped.

"Thora!" he yelled. "Do you know what's going on?"

Her response surprised him. He had expected a number of reactions, among them the worst-case scenario, but he certainly had not expected this.

The Arkonide woman was laughing.

Thora

She couldn't believe it. The results being given by the scanner surprised her so much that she lost her cool for a second. She had prepared herself for a terrible battle, and she expected to have to confront a new enemy fleet.

But this time events did not take the worst possible turn. The scanners were presenting her with a clear piece of information. Only one single spaceship had materialized, less than twenty thousand kilometers away. A gigantic, eight-hundred-meter spacesphere.

"It's an Arkonide battleship!" she yelled. "We're saved!"

Her words referred to far more than their current situation in the Vega system. Her thoughts were racing as she realized what the sudden appearance of the giant ship meant. A functional ship of her own people... The opportunity to advance into regions that lay far beyond the scope of the *Good Hope*... Once again being *properly*

mobile after the crash of the *Aetron* on Earth's Moon. The possibilities were overwhelming.

The battleship was heading straight for them. All of a sudden, Rhodan was standing next to her within the virtual control panel.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Of course she was. "Do you think I wouldn't recognize my own people's vessel?"

"That's not what I meant. *Are you absolutely sure this is not an enemy ship?*"

Thora stared at him. She wanted to admonish him, ask him how he could even think such a thing.

"Make radio contact!"

Her fingers raced across the switchboard. "I sent a standard identification signal with an automatic request to answer."

Rhodan stared at the strategic holo, at the image of the Arkonide craft on the display. Then he looked her in the face. His expression was hard, his nostrils trembling ever so slightly. "Change course, Thora."

"But..."

"Escape!"

She hesitated.

"Thora!"

She accelerated and changed course to take them away from the newly arrived Arkonide spaceship.

An automatic alarm wailed. A volley of attacks hit their protective shield, and the ship rocked. Metal screeched, as if the entire outer shell was going to tear apart. The virtual switchboard flickered for the bat of an eyelid in front of her.

Another shot came from the battleship, and Thora watched in shock as the *Good Hope's* protective shields became so overloaded within a single second that they were very close to collapsing. They would not survive a third hit. The shields could no longer produce the necessary energy.

In her mind's eye she saw the picture of the exploding Ferron ships and the Topsidian vessels as they fell apart. They were facing the very same fate. The *Good Hope* had met its master.

She accelerated using maximum power and programmed a daring maneuver to get them out of harm's way. But the inertial dampers couldn't absorb the full pressure of the move. Thora was brought to her knees by the thrust power. Rhodan groaned and

blood shot out of his nose. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw a hasty movement—someone flailing with their arms and legs, and then falling.

Her maneuver gained them a vital second, and the next volley missed them. Thora tried to gain an overview of the situation. Her only advantage over the Arkonide spacesphere was that the *Good Hope* was smaller and therefore more mobile. She could engage in bold maneuvers, but to think in purely defensive terms was ridiculous.

A hit grazed the shields, which were unable to dissipate all the energy. Something penetrated the force field, and the ship creaked threateningly. There was an explosion in the outer shell, and Thora saw it on the displays at the same moment she heard it.

Less than thirty meters away.

In a small auxiliary craft like the *Good Hope*, even the control center provided minimal safety.

She discovered an automatic alarm issued by the positronic. One of the main energy lines looked like it was going to break under the extreme pressure. While Thora was still trying to do something, the line exploded.

"Watch out!" she screamed.

Her warning came too late. A wall exploded and flung metal shrapnel all through the control center. Fire spewed out, automatically drawing her attention to them. A tongue of flame was shooting towards Anne Sloane, who had fallen under the pressure of the shock wave and was now lying helpless on the floor. The flames licked over her and...

Ras Tschubai appeared at Anne's side and teleported her away a split second later. They were both in the middle of the flames for half a second before they turned up a few steps away, uninjured.

Thora was running out of time. She had to get the *Good Hope* to safety.

"Fly to the next planet!" Rhodan called out to her. "We have to hide, or—"

Another explosion drowned out the rest of his words. Thora wasn't bothered, as she'd had the exact same idea, to seek protection near to or on one of the worlds close by.

The eighth planet was right in front of them. She accelerated at top speed, getting ready for a murderous braking maneuver. The battleship, a deathly giant, took up the chase behind them.

Out there in space, they didn't have a chance to escape it. They raced past one of the moons of the eighth planet. If they could reach the planet's atmosphere, the huge craft might not be able to follow them, or at least it would be a lot more limited in comparison to the *Good Hope*.

"I'm going to carry out an emergency maneuver," she called out. "It's going to be—"

She was unable to end her sentence. A direct hit blasted the protective shield, and it disintegrated without any notable resistance. The outer shell broke. The control center was shaken by violent tremors. The *Good Hope* was burning, a complete wreck, nothing more than a coffin in which they were all as good as dead.

Thora turned cold. Unable to move and burning like a torch, the ship drifted in the atmosphere of the eighth planet. Parts of the outer shell began to break off. The inferno could no longer be averted.

They were crashing.

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